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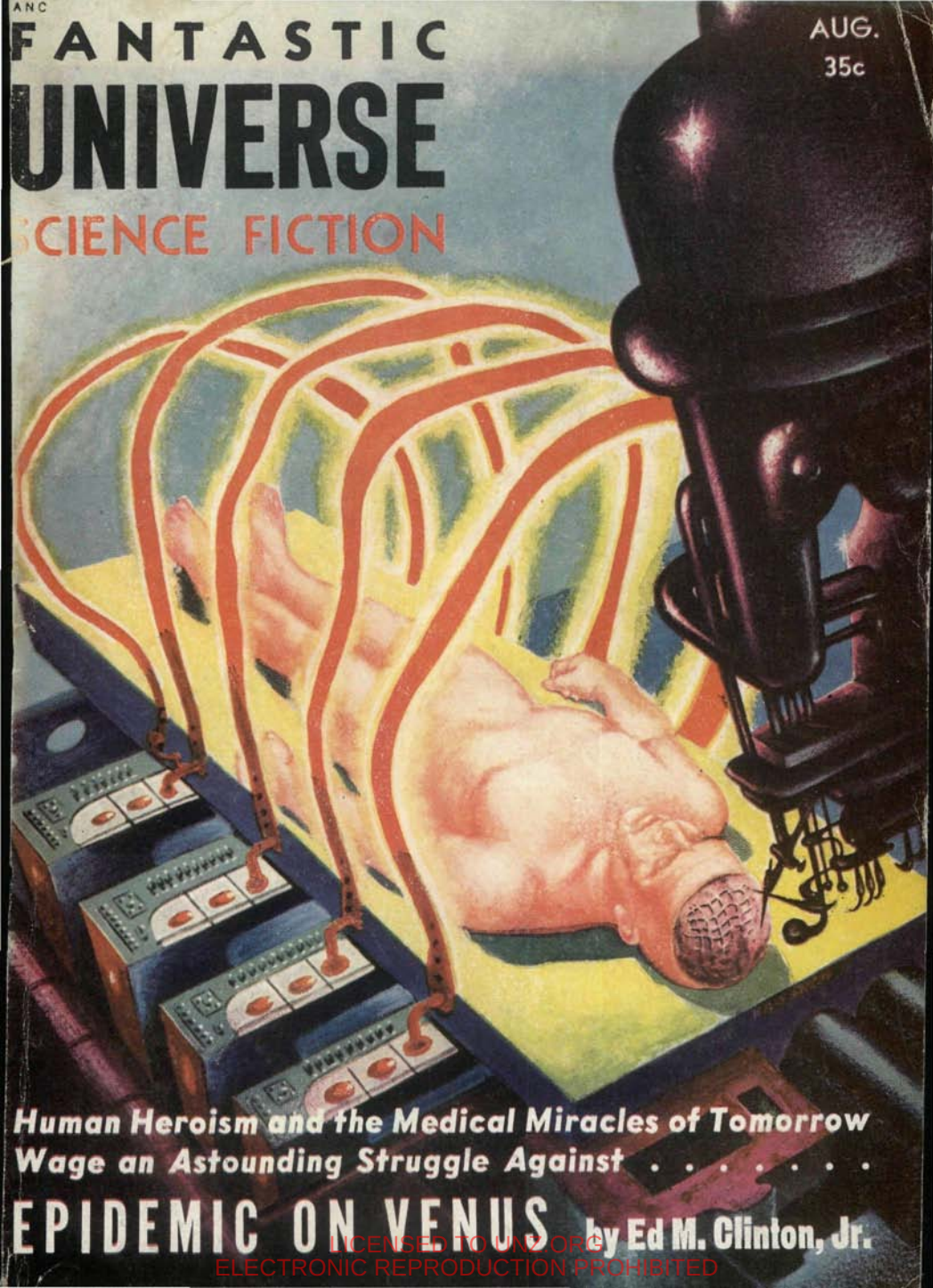

Human Heroism and the Medical Miracles of Tomorrow Wage an Astounding Struggle Against . . . . . .

EPIDEMIC ON VENUS by Ed M. Clinton, Jr.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE COVER . . .

IN RECENT YEARS—particularly in the realm of physical diagnosis—modern medicine has advanced in seven-league boots. So confident has been its stride and so brilliant its utilization of instruments of science undreamed of in the horse-and-buggy era that it has imparted to even the most routine of hospital examinations a deceptive aspect of infallibility.

You may now step without misgivings into a great modern hospital and be assured of a physical screening as exact and painstaking as a test for radio-active fall-outs in the vicinity of an atomic proving ground.

And yet—we've a disturbing, incredible suspicion that your assurance may be rudely shaken. You may chance to glance up, for instance, and see a momentary flicker of uncertainty in the gaze of the young chap in white who greeted you with such cheerfulness barely three minutes before. He's human, you see. He knows what the machines can do, but he's remembering what happened to him when he was just a young medical student and mistook a faint, ghostly shadow on an X-ray for a revelation of the direst significance.

Or he may simply be remembering how misleading and uncertain symptomology in general can be. He may be remembering what every competent medical man knows—that symptoms in themselves are seldom absolutely diagnostic, and that the organic changes which so often produce them may be simulated by perfectly healthy organs and tissues. The organs and tissues may not even be "acting up" psychosomatically. Symptoms often appear with a kind of ghostly irrationality, precisely as "fatigue" may develop in giant computing machines that cannot *logically* undergo the slightest impairment of function.

There is so much that remains totally inexplicable and beyond the range of human interpretation that our present diagnostic aids must remain just that—valuable assisting mechanisms with a rigidly circumscribed utility.

But suppose—just suppose—that the machines were to become robotlike in their complexity and *really* infallible in their diagnostic findings. Suppose that the instant you stretched yourself out on a hospital couch beams of radiant energy arched and flickered above you, and—

People vary in what they consider prophetic. But we rather suspect that this month's unusual cover illustration will set you to dreaming about the remarkable implications of an infallible mechanical diagnostician with an unerring instinct for getting at the root of "what ails you!"

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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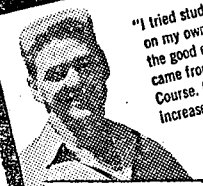
ARE YOU TOO OLD TO LEARN?

not at all, scientists say



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epidemic on venus

by . . . Ed M. Clinton, Jr.

They were men of vision, bringing to a new world a multitude of bright new skills. But in the mist was an enemy, cobra-deadly.

HANS SHAEFFER'S arrival as the fourth member of our medical staff at Hulbert, Venus, could hardly have been better timed. It was while I was giving him the customary 'this-is-Venus' talking to that *venusia mysteriosa* burst upon us.

I guess it must have been my umpteenth run-through of the new-arrival routine and it probably sounded pretty uninspired by then. And yet—how grim and tragic it all seems in retrospect! We were such blindly groping babes in the Venusian woods.

There was, of course, no logical justification for our surprise and consternation when the epidemic struck. When underneath the cloud of carbon dioxide that had baffled the astronomers for a century we found a Venus as green and warm and hospitable as Earth, why should we have been surprised by the appearance of disease-bearing organisms? Why shouldn't we have assumed that an almost identical environment would support germs to which human beings would be dangerously susceptible?

Every aspect of human life on Earth constantly reaffirms that man does not live by bread alone. Even the most savagely embittered of cynics must of necessity follow his guiding star in the silent watches of the night, "dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." And that is why, in Ed M. Clinton's stark documentary account of the human struggle for survival on a world primeval and unexplored the shining vision, the search for the unattainable, takes on such a thrilling and utterly irresistible immediacy.

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"But they've never given evidence of their presence before," I said, as we all settled down in Dr. Crocker's office a few minutes later. Jerry LeBlanc, a medical specialist of rare discernment, sat directly opposite Shaeffer nervously smoking a cigarette.

Shaeffer, a quiet, powerfully built man of my own age, was a biologist who had only recently become a doctor, and who looked upon Venus as a naturalist's paradise, which indeed it was.

"We assumed there were subtle differences of bodily structure," LeBlanc said, "and blood-stream susceptibility which would prevent us —and most probably all terrestrial vertebrates—from becoming adequate hosts for Venusian parasites. That certainly isn't a new concept, and it applies in a limited sense to the immunity factor in all communicable diseases."

Jerry offered Hans a cigarette, and as Shaeffer reached for it the visiscreen buzzed and announced the second tragically confirmatory link in the chain of events which was to turn mankind's Venusian adventure into an epic struggle against disaster.

I flipped the toggle. "Bad news I'm afraid," said Janie Nelson, our attractive blonde receptionist. "It's another sick call. The woman sounded desperately concerned."

I nodded. "Address, please."

"Just a moment." She scanned a sheet of paper. "Eighty-eight K Lane. Mrs. Chris Larsen."

"Thank you, darling." I scribbled the address. She stared at me, her eyes flashing, as the image faded.

"Sam," growled, Jerry, "why don't you marry that girl and settle some bets around here?"

I grinned and handed Jerry the address.

A few minutes later Jerry phoned in and said he was bringing Larsen to the hospital. "Call Crocker," he added. "I don't like the looks of this."

"All right," I said, and switched off.

Shaeffer frowned quizzically. "Do you people always become geared to an emergency so quickly?"

"We don't scare easily," I said. "But we've been holding our breath for a long time now."

I had Janie put a call through to the administration building, where Dr. Crocker was in conference with Charles Gordon, the founder and governor of the settlement.

The ambulance from 88 K Lane, with Jerry LeBlanc and his patient aboard, was back before Crocker arrived. Shaeffer and I and two nurses were waiting as it emerged from the mist which was steaming down from the high, swirling fog bank. The long Venusian night had just dispelled the last flicker of waning daylight. After almost four long months of getting used to the darkness you must adjust all over again when daylight comes, and the strain can be appalling.

Jerry leapt down from the back of the vehicle and the driver came

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around and helped him with the stretcher. I swung up beside them, spoke a few words, and then stopped. For I had seen the patient's face, staring up from the shadows.

There's something unutterably ghastly about the face of *mysteriosa.* I came to know the expression well—the utter withdrawal, the living consciousness cut off from the outside world. It suggests the way a man might look if he were watching himself in a mirror, dying.

"Okay, let's get on with it," I snapped, pulling myself together. "Careful now. Crocker will be here in a moment."

Crocker walked up even as I spoke. "Hello, Doc," I said.

Dr. Nathan Crocker was a sturdily built, white-haired man with a ruggedly weather-bronzed face lined with creases beyond counting. Imagine a legendary nineteenth century country doctor transported across the dark night of space to Venus, and you will have something of the essence of the man. But Crocker was no country doctor. He was a real cosmopolite in the world of medicine, who still moved and talked like a youngster, and could have surpassed me in endurance any day in the week.

"Well, Sam." He smiled cordially, all the lines in his face shifting in unison. "Precisely what does it look like?"

I shrugged. "Worse than the first case," I said. "See for yourself."

His face became somber. "I've seen some strange things, Sam. I spent ten years in Africa, as you know, doing some highly revealing work on sleeping sickness. Remind me to tell you sometime about poor Harry Graytag."

I didn't remind him of the fifty times he had already told me about Harry Graytag.

He bent over, and looked down at Larsen and as he did so his eyebrows twitched, and his whole scalp settled back. There was no other physical reaction. I could almost read his thoughts, though. He looked up, squinted, and then returned his gaze to the stricken man's convulsively distorted face. I knew that he was seeking to link what he knew and suspected with certain novel intangibles that eluded his comprehension.

Larsen was awake, or at least his watery, glazed eyes were wide open. There was something about his attitude that simulated an acutely heightened consciousness.

"Easy now," said Crocker, "how do you feel?"

Larsen did not reply. His mouth twitched and he started playing with the air with jerky shaking hands. Then he began to sob softly.

Crocker looked up at me again, then back at Larsen. He coughed and said, "I see." After a pause, he added: "Brain, I suppose. It might even be an abscess. Don't stand there staring. We'll run an electroencephalograph—"

Doc wore an impassive mask during the whole of the examination. We went over Larsen from head to

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foot, submitting him to every clinical test at our command. Unfortunately the more painstakingly thorough we became, the less we discovered. He was dreadfully sick, and that was all of which we could be certain.

After a while the lab reports began drifting in. The EEC showed nothing. The blood count indicated some anemia, which might well have been the result of his difficulty in taking food. The blood sugar index was only slightly above normal. As we expected, the electrocardiogram was perfectly normal. His blood pressure was a little low, but not alarmingly so. Our cluster of X-rays was just as unrewarding. There wasn't a mark on him, internally or externally. The routine radiation count was safe. The last data to be studied was the spinal fluid analysis. It was clear.

Jerry had talked to Mrs. Larsen, and incorporated in a written summary a history of her husband's illness until the moment of his collapse. Such information as she was able to supply was disappointingly meagre. There seemed to have been no previous contributing illnesses. As far as she knew, aside from the usual childhood maladies, his only sickness had been a bout with virus pneumonia. Until a week before, he had been in perfect health. Then he had begun to deteriorate. First he had lost his appetite. Then, rapidly, his strength had failed, and he had become increasingly irritable and restless. Finally he had taken to his bed, and she had called us.

Crocker paced nervously, his expression somber and preoccupied, his gnarled hands tightly intertwined behind his back.

"What do you think, Doc?" I ventured.

He grimaced in a manner that was all his own. The thousand lines in his face seemed to sink in deeper than ever. "What *can* I think?" he exclaimed. "I'm going to have to go pretty far back on this, Sam."

"Back?" asked Shaeffer, puzzled.

"I haven't been in the tropics for many years," Crocker said, looking up quickly and gesturing toward the window. "There's a tropical landscape all around us, but it's a little different from the tropics I knew as a young lad."

He went to the window and stood regarding the swirling fog outside. The winds of nightfall had passed, and the mist seemed to mirror the surge of his thoughts in its restless, mysterious eddying.

Hesitantly, as though reluctant to detach himself from his memory of the past, he turned and faced us. "We'll have to wait and see. I'll keep my eye on Larsen. Meanwhile, one of you had better get some sleep."

I advised Shaeffer to turn in. He was dead on his feet, having exposed himself too recklessly to the strains and stresses of the unfamiliar Venusian gravity after his weeks in space.

I injected several of our resi-

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dent customers with derivitomycin, changed a few bandages, took some temperatures, and found myself a magazine which I had read at least seven times before. I dozed off, secure in the knowledge that Jerry would be up in a while, anyway.

II

Crocker's hand on my shoulder roused me. I blinked and looked at my wrist-watch through blurred pupils. I had been sleeping almost seven hours, and the stiffness in my back bore painful testimony to the fact.

"Larsen's dead," Crocker said with grim urgency. "He died in agony, screaming and clawing at the air." His hand tightened on my shoulder. "We're conducting an immediate autopsy. Get dressed Sam, and come along. I'll need your moral support. We can't tell what may show up."

After the autopsy, we were still tragically bewildered.

A short while later, Governor Gordon called Crocker. I was in Crocker's office at the time, sitting directly across the room from him. I could hear Gordon's voice clearly on the visiphone.

"Anything new on Larsen?" I heard him ask.

"I'm afraid not," replied Crocker, shaking his head wearily.

"Well, something's come up," Gordon said. "Mrs. Larsen was just in to see me."

"Oh?" Crocker shifted in his chair. "If she's ill she should have called us."

"No, no, it's not that," Gordon said. "It's more serious." He paused, and I wondered what could be more serious than a repetition of the tragedy that had overtaken Larsen. Then I knew what it must be.

"She's asked for transportation back to Earth," Gordon said. "Immediately. I'm afraid she's legally entitled to it."

I leaned forward. Crocker had lied beautifully when he had assured Larsen's wife that her husband had died of a recurrence of virus pneumonia. We were afraid to tell her that we didn't know what had killed him. The settlement was precarious enough and to have let the fear of a new and horrible disease run like quicksilver through the tiny population would have been to court utter disaster.

"We'll have to be firm with her," said Crocker, managing to blend urgency with a patient sympathy. "There's too much danger she might carry the disease back to Earth. We have no way of knowing whether or not it's communicable." He ran trembling fingers through his tousled white hair. "We discussed this at the autopsy, Gordon. You said that unofficially—"

"Yes, unofficially Hulbert *is* under quarantine. But that doesn't solve the problem. I was wondering if it might not be advisable to tell her the truth."

"I hardly see how we can avoid it." Crocker gnawed at his underlip.

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"There may be one other alternative. I'll let you know, Gordon."

"All right. But be quick."

Crocker switched off the visiphone and stared into emptiness.

"I couldn't help overhearing," I murmured. "Mrs. Larsen's attitude makes our whole problem more difficult."

Crocker focussed his eyes on me. "Suppose you take a walk with me, Sam," he said. "Just talking it over may help me reach a decision." He grunted and unwound his wiry five-foot-five from behind the littered desk. "It's bad business, Sam," he added, shaking his head.

A hot, heavy rain was falling, blurring the great banks of artificial light that bathed the night-time colony. We pulled our feather-light raincapes high about our necks and moved forward shivering. Our feet, clattering on plastic walkways and sloshing through mud puddles at unpaved intersections, made the only sounds there were. In Hulbert in the year 1990 all men and women walked, for the only vehicles that the colony possessed were work trucks and the hospital's four ambulances.

As I walked, I thought of how far away, in time as well as in space, Earth seemed. Though in sober reality it had been scarcely two years, it seemed incalculably longer since I had last seen New York, or had watched fleecy clouds slip across the enchanted palette of a sunset sky. Here there was only fog—overhead and on every side. The fog and the somberly forbidding jungle, into which we cut—it seemed barely an inch a day—with our raucous, ugly machines.

All we had of Earth was this utilitarian, scientifically organized pin-prick of a settlement called Hulbert, after the memory of the first man who had crossed the dark night of space to Venus. A mining town, a pseudopod of civilization adhering with nothing more than the cement of human tenacity to the alien muck of a world men had not been born to. Every square foot was occupied, every minute of time consumed had a value precisely calculable in dollars and cents—a cost that had to be met.

Because of this, Gordon had designed the settlement on a completely functional basis and had imposed on it a casual but thoroughly mechanistic rulebook management. Someday, I hoped, all that would change. The settlement would take firmer root and the uranium shipments to Earth would begin to pay off. Then, surely, a little relaxation would be in order.

"I think we've arrived," Crocker's voice, half-muffled by his cape, interrupted my thoughts. We stood directly in front of a squat grey tin structure with windows, in all respects similar to the thousand other tin dwellings which housed the majority of the colonists.

He pushed the buzzer. The woman who let us in was small and blonde, rather unattractive and perhaps thirty-five years of age. She

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seemed to blend completely with the ugly little cabin that was her home, almost losing her identity in the process.

Crocker came directly to the point. "I understand you'd like to go back to Earth," he said.

Mrs. Larsen sat in a straight-backed metal chair, a grim and tragically pathetic figure shadowed by the harsh interior of the hut. I looked around that room for some measure of relief from the grey sameness, but my eyes encountered only one picture—an old and faded color photograph of an elderly couple, hung on the wall to my left. The floor was covered by a plain, resilient, durable linoleum. The furniture was mostly of light-weight metal, incredibly cold to the touch even on Venus. By comparison, the hospital seemed a haven of luxury.

At Crocker's words, Mrs. Larsen stiffened, and her hands tightened, one upon the other. "Why should I stay, now?" She was obviously fighting back tears. I felt very uncomfortable.

Crocker cleared his throat. "Mrs. Larsen, I have a confession to make. I'm not going to ask that you listen to me in strict confidence. I'll trust to your judgment on that."

She seemed stiffer than ever, already determined to take exception to whatever he might have to say. "What is it, Doctor?"

"Mrs. Larsen, your husband did *not* die of virus pneumonia. Sometimes we're not as wise as we should be, we doctors. We just don't know everything—especially about Venus." He scratched the back of his head with a shy gesture. "We wish we did, but we don't." His knotty hand swept jerkily through the air. "He died of something from out there, Mrs. Larsen, something from out of the jungle."

She gasped and seemed to crumple. "Why didn't you tell me this before? Why did you try to deceive me with a foolish lie?" Her voice became shrill. "Did you think me lacking in courage? Did you? I have a right to know."

Crocker leaned forward and put a hand upon hers. "We're just trying to keep the others from becoming frightened. Until we know exactly what killed your husband, we can't take a chance on its being carried back to Earth."

"Are you trying to tell me I can't go back?" There was cold fury in her eyes.

"Mrs. Larsen, I don't have to tell you what might happen if the other settlers should learn that a new disease has taken two lives and may take more. There was an earlier case, you see."

"But—" And then she bent forward and started to cry, her shoulders sagging and her face pressed into her thin hands.

Crocker reached over again and gripped her hand tightly. "You and your husband came to Venus to build a new life. Just now you spoke of courage. Without great and exceptional courage there would have been no settlement, and you

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are one of the original colonists."

"But Chris and I—I mean, without him—"

"Of course. But walk through the settlement sometime and consider how important its preservation is to every one of its citizens. None of us has an easy task." He got up, somewhat uncertainly. I followed suit. "Mrs. Larsen, I thought perhaps you'd like to join our hospital staff. We're very short-handed, you know. We could really use you. And frankly, if the disease reaches epidemic proportions, you could be of tremendous help."

III

It was still raining when we went back to the hospital. "Dr. Crocker," I said, shaking my head, "you're a wonder . . ."

The night wore on. Gordon announced that a case of unusual virus pneumonia had appeared in the settlement, and warned the colonists to report instantly anyone stricken with a sudden illness, accompanied by great weariness, loss of appetite, and, in the end, utter collapse and a complete inability to initiate conscious action.

But nothing further of an alarming nature developed, and we began to hope that we had permitted ourselves the rather masochistic luxury of a good scare. Crocker, untiringly studying Larsen's history, would knit his brows and shake his head, and then finger his way with maddening deliberation through a thumbworn and tattered medical volume.

Colonial Transport Service spaceships continued to arrive and depart on schedule. They brought new colonists and the precious supplies we couldn't yet produce on Venus, and took back with them the incalculably valuable uranium ore which was Hulbert's economic lifeline to security.

"Free land—Unparalleled opportunity!" the posters on Earth kept shouting. *"Go to Venus!"*

An over-burdened civilization was seeking equilibrium and we were the fulcrum upon which it swung. The wheels of industry were turning ever more staggeringly to the surge of atomic power stemming from the product of Venus' vast uranium fields.

The First Interplanetary Land Rush, the greatest movement into free land since the opening of the American West more than a century before, was in full swing. First there was Hulbert and New America, and then an increasing sprinkling of other settlements founded by small and large nations from one end of the Earth to the other.

Gordon's dream of a new world for men was truly nearing fulfillment. The statistics told their own story. It had taken four years to attract a thousand settlers and their families to New America. Now, in less than two months, since the beginning of the year 1990, Hulbert's population had increased twofold.

And then at the peak of the rush,

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when everything Gordon had hoped for seemed about to be realized, *venusia mysteriosa* struck again, and again, with an appalling mortality.

It was Shaeffer who named the ghastly plague the Dying Death.

Ten cases came in during fifteen terrifying periods. In a population the size of Hulbert's, it had all the earmarks of an incipient epidemic. We were helpless. All we could do was to attempt, with all the resources at our command, to dull the agony of death. Always it was the same, and one by one the colonists died, their pitiful, emaciated bodies leaving behind not one jot of information as to the cause of the invariably fatal malady.

I began to hate the sight of the operating room. Crocker himself supervised every desperate recourse to surgery and each time he went about his task he seemed to become a little grimmer and a little more drawn of face. Only his hands remained steady and unshaking.

Then one morning I emerged from the operating room to see Charles Gordon striding down the hallway toward us, his lips set in tight lines and his head cast ever so slightly sideward. He was the kind of man who could hold steadfast to the most unattainable of dreams and drive his way doggedly through the underbrush of human inadequacy.

"Well, Crocker—anything new?" he demanded. Close up, I saw that there were shadows of worry around his vigorous black eyes and that in general he had the appearance of a man who wasn't getting nearly enough rest.

Crocker began pulling off his surgical gloves. "I'm afraid not, Gordon," he replied, laying both gloves carefully in his left hand. "We keep getting the same answer."

"You think it's hopeless, then?" asked Gordon, staring hard at the surgeon.

"These people die," Crocker spoke calmly, his pale blue eyes shifting out of focus. "They die of something we know virtually nothing about. Something, I think, of a different, a completely alien disease process." He shook his head and ran skinny fingers through his white hair. "Bacteria of a similar environment *should*— But I told them they were wrong."

The three of us paced silently toward Crocker's office. I got the distinct impression that Gordon was reluctant to speak his mind with complete candor. As we reached the door to Crocker's office, he asked abruptly: "Crocker, do you honestly think we can cope with this ourselves?"

Crocker turned with one hand on the doorknob, his eyebrows raised.

"For God's sake," snapped Gordon, "we mustn't let pride stand in the way of admitting that a tragedy of this magnitude may be too much for us?"

You could almost see the ramrod unfold in Crocker's spine. His eyes flashed, and his hand tightened on the knob until the knuckles showed

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white against the pink flesh. "You don't really mean 'we', Charlie. You mean 'Dr. Nathan Crocker.'" He swung open the door and went into the office. "You are the governor, Charlie. You'll have to decide that for yourself."

The door slammed in our faces.

Gordon stretched his shoulders nervously. Then he gestured down the hallway and took firm hold of my arm. We walked.

"Smith, I know I can trust you," he said. "I think you'll agree that we can't let any element of personal feeling influence our judgment in this matter. Crocker's a pretty old man."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," I said, hating Gordon for putting me so aggressively on the defensive.

"Certainly not," he agreed instantly. "Crocker is eminently suited to this job, with half a lifetime of experience in tropical research behind him. But a lifetime of experience can make a man stubborn—perhaps dangerously so in a situation like this."

At the hospital entrance, Gordon turned to me and smiled—with a warmth unusual in that hard-driving man. "Smith, just remember what I've said. If you ever *honestly* think that Crocker has lost control of the situation, let me know." He shook my arm before relaxing his grip. "Thanks."

I watched him go, feeling a little better. When I went into Crocker's office a moment later he didn't ask me what had transpired between Gordon and myself, for which I was thankful. He just muttered, "Sam, I'm going to make Gordon change his mind."

We knew we could not long hide our ignorance, and the fact that the frightful Dying Death was something more than just a virulent atypical pneumonia. Rumor and gossip were already working their havoc. After all, there were the husbands, wives and children who had lost loved ones and who had seen the mysterious malady's initial phases, and could not help but wonder and pass on their dark doubts to their frightened neighbors.

All this time Mrs. Larsen was wonderful, never sparing herself at the hospital, keeping up the confidence of doctors and patients alike. She was, I came to realize, one of the really great pioneer women of Venus.

Crocker worked doggedly, denying himself desperately needed rest, studying case histories and checking the autopsies. He spent hours in the lab with the technicians, taking copious notes, and reading through the fabulous, worn library of medical volumes that dealt with every aspect of medical research and practice. He became so familiar with the unvarying pattern of *mysteriosa* that we could plot perfectly the development of a case, almost to predicting the hour of death.

Then, miraculously, the near-epidemic halted after the twelfth case—and Crocker found something of

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startling significance in a post mortem.

IV

For thirteen periods we had relief. Our last case had just deceased—she had been the eighth woman to succumb—and Crocker and Shaeffer were performing the autopsy. For the first time in weeks I had a few free minutes, and I was spending them with Janie Nelson, our all-around receptionist.

Jerry's remark about marrying her meant simply that I was convinced that Janie was the most desirable girl in Hulbert. I had just remarked that I liked being with her when she said abruptly: "Sam, how long do you think we can keep up this pretense?"

That came as quite a jolt. "Why, I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"Yes, you do. You know exactly what I'm talking about," she affirmed.

"Then suppose you tell me."

"You're in love with me, and you want to marry me. But you're afraid to say so because the situation here has become so desperately tragic."

She took one of my hands in both of hers—too tightly, I thought. "Sam, *I'm* scared. Suppose you can't find the answer. Suppose the settlement has to be abandoned. *We* can't go back!" She shook my hand tensely. "We can't, without carrying the disease to Earth."

I honestly hadn't thought of that. I had been working too close to it to consider how it might affect me personally. But Janie had seen the miserable frightened faces passing in and out, and was in constant, tragic contact with the most thoroughly personal part of it.

I tried to picture the situation she had suggested. All contact, all supplies would be cut off. We'd be alone in that planetary vastness of jungle, dying one by one of *mysteriosa*. No, it was impossible. It was too horrible to contemplate. But I saw in Janie's tormented blue eyes that awful alienness of Venus as I had not dared to visualize it before.

I heard Crocker and Shaeffer coming down the corridor, their steps rapid and excited. Then I heard Crocker's confident laughter. He hadn't laughed like that since before Larsen's death.

He came toward me and stopped in front of me and clapped both hands on my shoulders.

"Come to my office," he said. "I've got something to show you."

"Doc thinks we've found it," said Shaeffer, his voice utterly weary. "We discovered a little puncture in the cerebellum—"

"A culture so small, a perforation so tiny as to be almost invisible," Crocker said. "And a colony of bacteria and a virus present in the surrounding cells."

It was a catastrophic coincidence. Consider how beautifully the pieces fell into place, misleading us almost to complete disaster. Consider the sudden cessation of new cases, and Crocker's discovery of the virus in

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the cerebellum of the *last* victim of *mysteriosa*. Remember, too, that we were engaged in no mere abstract research.

We were fighting for the very life of the colony, and hence had no time to waste. Our testing and research and re-checking had to be of the quickest possible sort. It had also to be as direct and immediately applicable as good science would allow. We were just not quite good enough scientists.

But there was rejoicing in the hospital. For the first time the dark shadow that had been about to swallow us lightened a little. Gordon was elated. He congratulated Crocker and thanked him and told him to get some rest. I forgot Janie's fears and the picture of an abandoned settlement faded. We went fearlessly ahead and made tentative marriage plans.

With loving hands Crocker bred a culture. When he had enough, he tested some for sterilization. The bacteria he took from the culture succumbed completely to a prolonged exposure of infra-red radiation. It was a happy bit of news, for it meant that individuals exposed to Venusian conditions could return to Earth after the infra-red treatment which had been standard all along. It was a great step forward.

Crocker bred the culture further. He prepared a toxin and injected it into the cerebellum of one of Shaeffer's guinea-pigs. Three periods later the pig could no longer maintain its balance and exhibited all measurable physical signs of *mysteriosa*.

In two more periods Crocker had his antitoxin. He then proceeded to check it, two ways. First for inoculatory effect, and then for the slim possibility that it might prove curative. Into one guinea-pig he first injected the toxin, waited until the animal became clearly ill, and then gave it an injection of the antitoxin. Many were the guinea-pigs that laid down their lives to enable Crocker to master the technique of time and dosage.

But at the end of two months, when the long night had passed and the sweltering heat of day once more returned to cause us acute discomfiture, he called Gordon and told him that the Dying Death had been conquered. The anti-toxin was both inoculatory and curative.

In one of those dramatic announcements in which he took delight, Gordon revealed the truth to the settlers, and we set up an inoculation schedule. It was a nerve-wracking task. We had to be scrupulously careful, too, since our supply of anti-toxin, though growing, was severely limited. Everything went smoothly, however, and in about fifty periods—twenty-five Earth days—we had over half the settlement inoculated.

And then, disaster struck again.

I was in Doc's office, drowsily relaxing in his swivel chair and listening to the distant droning of the mining machinery. I was thinking very comfortable thoughts about

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Janie, when the buzzing of the visi-screen aroused me from my lethargy and I bent forward and snapped the toggle.

"Hello, darling," I said. "I was just thinking about you."

"I'm glad," Janie said. "But this is urgent. "There's an emergency wave-length radio call for Dr. Crocker. Sparks is holding it down at the field until he can get a local line for it."

"Who sent the message?"

"New Moscow. Sparks says they'll talk to no one but Crocker."

I hurried out of the office and down to the inoculation station. I was fairly certain I knew what the call was about. We had been expecting to hear sooner or later from the other settlements. It seemed unlikely that the Dying Death would remain localized in Hulbert alone.

When I went in Doc had just finished an inoculation. They were frequently a little rugged. The reaction was often severe and usually required a period of enforced rest.

"New Moscow wants to talk to you," I said.

He looked up, the hypodermic gleaming in his hand. "Take over for me, Sam," he said. "This may be serious."

After inoculation we always delivered the patients back to their cabins in stretchers. I got Crocker's last victim on his way and loaded up for the next in line.

When Crocker finally received the call, he found himself talking to a very heavy Russian accent. He told me later that the conversation ran as follows:

"This is Dr. Pietr Arensky, Medical Director, Little Russia. Doctor, we have what we believe to be our first case of *mysteriosa*. Your previous communication regarding the location of the virus is most appreciated, but—"

"Of course. But I must warn you we are in perilous short supply. I'll provide what I can of the toxin, culture, and anti-toxin. Incidentally, I recommend at least twenty powers magnification when you search for those punctures."

"Yes, I understand. Would twenty-four hours give you sufficient time to prepare the materials?"

"I should think so. And by all means keep in touch with me, Dr. Arensky."

V

Twenty-four hours later, rather desperately in need of sleep but excited at the prospect of seeing somebody new for a change, I was down at the field with the toxins and cultures. The landing field was our pride and joy. At the time it was certainly the finest landing area in existence on the two worlds, boasting twenty cradles, and hangars enough for twice that many transport spacecraft.

At one end was the administration building, which was also the indoctrination station and the physical capitol of American Venus. Every person arriving on the planet passed through that imposing building and

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was screened from hairline to toenail. It may seem that these extensive facilities far exceeded the needs of a tiny settlement like Hulbert. They did. But we were looking ahead, to a time when Hulbert would be the largest metropolis on Venus.

I strolled out onto the field, scanning the grey sky. Far to the south I could see the Russian ship—a black speck moving rapidly against the mottled backdrop of clouds. In another moment it was hovering directly overhead, and I could hear the droning of its auxiliary motors. Then the tower triple-flashed, a landing cradle slipped open, and the ship dropped neatly down on charging jets.

I strode across the field to meet the burly figure emerging from the ship. He came swiftly toward me, smiling and shouting something in Russian.

I smiled back, and shook my head, and handed him the kit containing the all-important materials. He spoke again in Russian and saluted briefly. We touched hands, and then he was hurrying back toward his ship.

The cradle swung south. The tower gave its long-short flash, and the Russian craft roared upward and out over the rippling sea of jungle. In a moment it was gone.

As I turned back toward the administration building, I saw Shaeffer. He was just emerging on the field, a hatless figure who was gesturing in my direction. "Sam!" he shouted. "Sam! Doc wants you right away."

I joined him in the front of the hangars and the first question I asked was: "What's on Crocker's mind?"

"Two more cases of *mysteriosa*," he gasped. "That's what's on his mind."

We both ran toward the administration building . . .

It looked like the real thing this time. By the end of that period there were eight cases in the hospital, all in a critical condition. The antitoxin was our major problem. At the rate at which we were using it we knew it would soon be exhausted.

We worked on into the next period without sleep, our task made more difficult by frightened people who came to the hospital with harmless sneezes and backaches they mistook for early symptoms of *mysteriosa*.

"What we need," growled Shaeffer through stubble-shadowed lips as we clucked like frenzied mother hens over our dwindling cultures, "are virus with a hopped-up sex urge."

Though it was pretty well knocked into a cocked hat, we salvaged what we could of the regular inoculation program.

After thirty-six hours without sleep, Crocker sent me to my room to rest. As I moved out into the corridor I heard Janie call me, and turned to see her standing almost at my elbow, her face white and anx-

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ious. She had that scared look again, and I didn't like the ugly things it did to her face.

"It's Moscow again, Sam," she said. "Where's Dr. Crocker?"

"I'll take it," I told her. "If they don't like me, they can— Look, darling, you get some sleep. I'll put somebody else on the desk. We'll manage."

"Are you sure you can? I mean—"

"Get!" I kissed her, and turned her firmly about.

I knew enough about the board to pick up the New Moscow line from Sparks. Arensky asked for Crocker the instant I established contact, but I told him that my superior was unavailable, and that whatever he had to say I would be capable of comprehending. I was just tired enough to be a little testy.

"Very well," Arensky said. "Something is very, very bad."

"We've got our troubles too," I told him. All the same, I didn't like the feeling that came over me when I heard him draw in his breath. "Go on," I said.

"One of our *mysteriosa* cases passed away abruptly as the result of a heart attack brought on by his weakened condition. We conducted an immediate autopsy. But, Dr. Smith" —at this point Arensky's deep voice rose an octave or so, and almost cracked—"*there is no puncture in the cerebellum.*"

I choked down the gasp that formed in my throat. "I'm sure you're mistaken," I said quickly. "No offense intended, Doctor. But so minute a puncture would be very easy to miss. Try a lateral."

"We did. Our staff is very good. And since we knew exactly what we were looking for—"

"I see." I had to steady myself against the switchboard. "I'll tell Crocker. We'll contact you." I clicked off, leaving Sparks with a fuming, frightened Russian to pacify.

I went down the corridor very slowly, thinking about what Gordon had said to me about an old man's stubbornness. I knew that Arensky's message would just about kill Crocker. I didn't dare let myself think what it might do to the colony. Possibly Arensky was mistaken, but in my heart I knew that he wasn't. I was rationalizing, desperately and without any real conviction.

I found Crocker bending over a patient in the crowded main ward. When he saw me he straightened and the little muscles around his jaws tightened.

"What's wrong, Sam?" he asked.

"I've been talking to Arensky," I said.

"And?" He turned from his patient, his eyes searching my face.

"One of their *mysteriosa* patients died."

Crocker's expression did not change. "So soon?" he asked, quietly.

"His heart gave out. They conducted an autopsy, but they found no—no—"

"No puncture," he completed my

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halting sentence. His calmness stunned me. He simply scratched his unshaven chin and shook his head. "Time will tell," he said firmly, and turned back to his patient.

I returned to my room, and fell immediately into a deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

The hoot of an ambulance awakened me. I was still slipping on my surgical gown when I joined the stretcher bearers. I was anxious to talk to the patient but when the bearers halted at my request I saw that his condition was too far advanced. I cursed the stricken man's stupidity. How could he have been fool enough to ignore the always pronounced initial symptoms?

Jerry LeBlanc descended from the ambulance and stood beside me. His hand shook as he reached down and pulled the blankets off the man's shoulder. "Look, Sam," he said, pointing.

The man had waited because he had felt convinced that he was in no danger. He had been inoculated.

VI

I accompanied Crocker on an urgent visit to Gordon. Crocker's face was grave, his manner abrupt to the point of rudeness. "Sit down, Charlie," he said. "This is going to hurt. It seems that the inoculation doesn't work."

Gordon's eyes widened just a trifle and he leaned forward across his desk, but he said nothing as the other continued: "I now know that I can't cure anyone of *mysteriosa*, much less prevent their getting it. I made a serious mistake, but it was unavoidable."

Gordon eased back into his chair, and compressed his lips, his deep black eyes unfathomable.

"Apparently," Crocker went on, "we have accidentally stumbled across another disease, the one whose cause is the virus we found. Our lab animals displayed a physical decay so similar to *mysteriosa* that I was misled into thinking—"

"Never mind!" Gordon seemed to explode to his feet. He strode to the window and stared out, his hands locked tightly behind his back. "Crocker, what do you expect me to say? Your 'mistake', as you call it, has done more damage than the Dying Death itself." He turned furiously toward us. "Do you realize that everything we've worked so hard for may be irretrievably lost because of this?"

Crocker nodded, his face grim. "You told me, once, that we couldn't afford to let pride stand in our way. Well, Charlie"—he returned Gordon's stare unwaveringly —"I'm willing to step aside."

Gordon drew in his breath sharply. "Very well. I'll leave for Earth on the next CTS ship. I'll bring back a staff of specialists in internal medicine from Earth. The best I can find. They may not ask you to step aside. But at least you won't have to assume sole responsibility for whatever future mistakes may be made."

Outside of the hospital staff, only

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Gordon's immediate aides, Colin MacDuffie's Civil Police and the top engineers at the mines knew that Gordon had left. He carried to Earth an order that must have caused him the most intense anguish. CTS must be halted until further notice. To Acting Governor Carroll Gleason he assigned the unpleasant task of turning back the shiploads of colonists so unfortunate as to arrive before the order could be implemented. No more colonists could be accepted into the plague-ridden colony. Only the uranium exports and supply imports could continue.

At the hospital, we had to begin all over again. We needed a volunteer, somebody who had not yet been inoculated. No guinea-pig would do. Finally, one of the miners, a man whose wife had succumbed to *mysteriosa,* offered himself. With considerable trepidation, Crocker assumed full responsibility and the test was made. The miner was injected with toxin. Simultaneously, Mrs. Larsen, who had been inoculated, was at her own request infected.

She remained perfectly healthy.

But in four periods, the miner became desperately ill. He lost muscle control, complained of pains in the head, and had trouble maintaining his balance. But he was at all times perfectly coherent, and except for the extreme discomfort of his condition, showed none of the most noticeable psychological signs of advanced *mysteriosa.* Crocker gave him the anti-toxin, and he recovered.

"Well," said Crocker, almost smiling, "at least we beat one devil to the punch."

So the inoculation of the settlement continued. But cases of the Death kept coming in. We were sure now that *mysteriosa* was not particularly contagious. The occurrences had been too generally scattered, and we had been unable to establish a pattern of contact based on any reasonably consistent incubation period. It was as maddening as it was frightening.

Life settled into a frantic routine. We completed the inoculation of the settlement against *doloria Crockeria*—Crocker's disease. From the captain of a CTS ship, picking up a load of uranium for Earth, we learned that Gordon had arrived on Terra. Reports that the Death was taking its toll in the other colonies trickled in. Little Copenhagen, French Venus, Brazilian Enterprise, Little Britain—each reported one or more fatal cases.

Despite my familiarity with death, it made me almost physically ill. Once, alone in my room, I raged futilely for an hour, cursing the swirling fog and shaking my fist at the indifferent black jungle that walled us in. After that I slept, exhausted, for fifteen hours.

On the eve of the new year, with Gordon gone scarcely three months, there had been well over a hundred cases of *mysteriosa* in Hulbert. Eighty-five of them had died and

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the prognosis for the still-living patients was absolutely negative.

With prospects of anything but a Happy New Year, the hospital staff tried to relax in Crocker's office. We drank a toast to the occasion, and attempted desperately to be cheerful and uncomplaining. But we couldn't escape *mysteriosa*. It dominated our thoughts and inevitably our conversation returned to it.

Crocker, who seemed to have aged years since Gordon's departure, sipped his Scotch and said, "It will take considerable doing, even by the persuasive Charles Gordon, to get the kind of men we need to come here now."

"Perhaps we'll surprise him," somebody cheerfully volunteered.

Jerry LeBlanc, a good-looking lad with a Barrymore profile, stared into the half-empty glass which was clenched tightly in his hand. "How do we know he's coming back?" he asked. "How can we be sure?"

"That's a devil of a thing to say!" I exclaimed.

"Is it?" He gulped the rest of his drink and stood up. "I don't share your trust in Gordon. How do we know he hasn't deliberately walked out on us, deliberately left us here to rot? Why should he come back to this hell-hole?"

I got up, and gripped him firmly by the shoulders. "You'd better sober up," I said. "You can't really believe that."

"I believe it, all right. I tell you, you're all crazy." He reeled away from me, staggered and almost fell. "We must have been out of our minds to come here in the first place. Venus will never be successfully colonized."

Crocker's angry voice crashed through the crowded room. "LeBlanc, sit down! *Sit down* or I'll call MacDuffie and have you locked up." He rose, a tight-lipped, bent old man with fire in his eyes. "Do you hear me?"

Jerry started to say something, choked, and then sent his glass crashing to the floor. It bounced once before it splintered, scattering fragments in all directions.

"Happy New Year, everybody!" he shouted, and stumbled from the office. The room vibrated for a moment to the slammed door.

Janie turned to me, her eyes bright with alarm. "Sam, you'd better talk to him," she whispered.

I nodded and pressed her hand. "I think you're right."

LeBlanc was nowhere in sight when I stepped out of the office. For a second, I hesitated. And in that second the crashing thunder of a shot rang out in the stillness of the hospital.

Crocker, with the others behind him, was in the hallway and accompanying me toward Jerry's room almost before the echoes had died away. The door was hanging ajar. I kicked it open and the stench of gunsmoke stung my nostrils.

Jerry was sprawled awkwardly across his tumbled bed. His head was shattered and there was blood on the thrown-back blankets. One

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arm was jammed behind him where he had fallen back upon it. The other, swaying still, hung above a smoking automatic on the floor.

In a few hours the news was all over Hulbert that one of the doctors had committed suicide. To the colonists that could only mean that even the medical staff was giving up.

A half hour after the tragedy Gleason, the acting governor, put through an urgent call to Crocker's office.

"The situation is becoming progressively worse," he said simply. "We're having a council of war over here. We want you in on it."

Crocker insisted that I accompany him. We were the last to arrive. Besides the acting governor and ourselves, Rudolph Ahrens, chief engineer, was there with two of his assistants, as was MacDuffie, and Gleason's three young assistants.

Gleason came directly to the point.

"Gentlemen, I'm going to be completely frank. If I were the final authority I'd be inclined to suggest we pack our bags and admit defeat. It's that serious. But as matters stand, we'll probably go on doing what we can—until we're either dead or candidates for glory."

The group remained silent, but the tension in the room seemed visibly to mount, and become for an instant almost unbearable.

"The settlers," continued Gleason, "have interpreted Dr. LeBlanc's suicide as an admission of defeat on our part. I can understand their reaction." He turned to an assistant, who handed him a bulky envelope of documents.

"Gentlemen, these petitions have *all* been received in the last four hours. There are considerably more than three hundred of them. They are petitions for transportation back to Earth. And the petitioners realize that if they return to Earth, they forfeit all rights and property claims attached to their service here."

MacDuffie's heavy, stern countenance puckered, and he whistled long and softly. Ahrens shook his head and muttered to himself. Gleason nodded grimly, riffling thoughtfully through the petitions with his index finger, and when he spoke it was with some hesitation.

"It seems to me that we have only one recourse. Heretofore the local government of this community has resided in the semi-formal elected Citizen's Council. MacDuffie's group"—he nodded toward the big man—"has provided us with all the law enforcement that has been necessary." He paused an instant, then went on: "The Civil Police will henceforth be much more than a mild agency of law enforcement. It will have the sanction of absolute authority. In the event of any serious disturbance, its authority will only be subordinate to that of this office."

"But what you're suggesting," I gasped, "is actually martial law."

He swung toward me. "Yes, Dr. Smith—martial law. But it will be guided by reason and sanity." He

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turned, and spoke directly to MacDuffie. "There must be no blustering soldierism, no infringement on the rights of law-abiding colonists."

MacDuffie nodded. I could hear Ahrens still muttering, shaking his head as if in reply to himself. Wilbur Hulbert's portrait seemed to stare accusingly at us from over Gleason's head.

"Then we're all agreed," Gleason said. "I also suggest that all of us here, and the rest of your staff, Dr. Crocker, carry arms. Discreetly, please. Those of us who are in authority will be in constant danger of physical assault by hysterical individuals or groups."

"Have you any idea when Governor Gordon will be back?" I asked.

"I wish I could answer that. We must accept as unfortunate the fact that his absence is bound to get out, and probably has already."

Gleason turned to Ahrens. "Rudy, be particularly careful. My guess would be that if we do have trouble it will start at the mines."

Ahrens nodded. "We've already had fist fights and several big arguments."

Crocker and I walked back to the hospital through a heavy, hot drizzle. Doc was silent, his face a fluid mask for thoughts which could hardly have been pleasant.

"I was just thinking," he said suddenly and with startling candor, "what Gordon would think if he came back now, and found me as keen and confident and certain of eventual victory as the younger men he'll be bringing with him."

I realized then, as Gordon had intimated, how completely he was dominated by the deep, intense pride of an old man dedicated to the last important task of a long career. The challenge had to be met, for every man has one shining gift to bestow, and one citadel of integrity which cannot be undermined.

VII

The following day utter disaster struck. It was twilight, and a thick rain was falling, driven slantwise by a vicious wind which whipped the great trees skirting the jungle's edge into a dancing frenzy. Rudolph Ahrens, scrunched down in his desk chair in his tin-hut office near the head of Shaft Number One, looked up in amazement, wondering what it was that had disturbed his concentration. Abruptly the truth dawned on him.

One by one, the machines were stopping.

The machines never stopped in Hulbert. They had operated constantly for five years, and without them the colony could not have survived.

It was a major disaster.

Ahrens arose hastily and went outside. He saw immediately that the men of the incoming shift had collected in little groups along the line of shaft openings, and were no longer moving into the mines. He saw also that there was a flickering

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at the head of the elevator shaft at Pit One.

He stared at it, and after a moment realized that more miners were emerging from the darkness into the twilight, their bodies casting flickering shadows as they poured out. They came forward, like a viscous living syrup spilling from an overturned bottle, and quickly joined the men of the incoming shift. The very silence of their movement was terrifying.

Ahrens peered down the long line of mines. Everywhere the tragedy was repeating itself. The men had stopped working.

Footsteps clattered suddenly on the ground behind him. He jerked around, his fists clenched just as one of MacDuffie's men, the gold band of authority gleaming on his forearm, came scrambling toward him.

"This is serious, Ahrens," he shouted. "We've got to do something."

Ahrens touched the knuckle of his index finger to his thick mustache. "Call Gleason from my office," he ordered. "Hurry." The man nodded and moved quickly past him into the hut.

Ahrens turned to face the advancing line of miners. "Why aren't you men working?" he shouted, the wind almost swallowing his words.

The ragged line halted. The whispering and muttering subsided. There remained only a restless stirring, made more ominous by the patter of the rain and the wind groaning through the trees.

Suddenly, with startling abruptness, the night lights of Hulbert went on, blinding in their brilliance, transforming the dusk into a tableau of glittering luminescence.

One miner detached himself from the others, and shuffled forward until he was about halfway to Ahrens. The engineer, understanding, crossed the remaining distance and the two men stood facing each other. Ahrens planted his fists on his hips, and stared steadily at the miner through the glare.

The miner seemed a trifle chagrined. He reached out to shake Ahren's hand. The engineer frowned and obliged.

"Dr. Ahrens," the man began haltingly, "we want you to understand we've got nothing against you personally."

Ahrens looked out at the nervous crowd, now stretching in an unbroken line to the mine entrances. Then he returned his gaze to the man in front of him, and laughed.

"It's just that we came here to mine uranium, because the government gave us good money and free land and a chance at a new life," the miner went on quickly. "I guess none of us figured it would be easy work. But we didn't come to see our wives and friends die helpless around us, or to die ourselves—for nothing." He scratched his head. "You see what I mean?"

"Go on," said Ahrens, mopping rain from his brow.

"Well, now, Dr. Ahrens, there are some things we've found out

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that we don't like. One is, they aren't going to let us leave the colony. The second is, Governor Gordon's already gone. That seems kind of unfair."

"So you've decided?"

"We've decided that we aren't mining another ounce of uranium until you've agreed to let us go back to Earth—if we want to go back. I'm sorry about this. But we've got to hold your engineers until we get our way. Not as hostages, exactly. Just as—well, insurance."

"I see," nodded Ahrens. "I don't suppose anything I could say—"

"Nothing," said the miner, shaking his head emphatically. "Nothing will suit us but action, and a ruling signed by Gordon or Gleason. Until then you'll have to clear out, Dr. Ahrens. We'd keep you, too, but you're an old man. We're afraid you might get hurt."

Ahrens looked out at the shifting men again, at their spokesman, and shook his head. He could not entirely fail to sympathize with them. He felt a hand nudge his elbow. It was MacDuffie's policeman.

"I think we'd better go, Ahrens."

"Yes, I think so," agreed the engineer, and together they left the area . . .

Hulbert was—the mines. When the mines stopped, Hulbert stopped too. Inevitably the strike vitally involved almost every family in the colony, for only the hospital staff and a few other specialist occupations did not work in the mines.

Somehow, though, order was maintained. Apparently the spokesman for the miners—who had been patently embarrassed—had really represented the entire colony. Shocked and frightened they might be, but there were no cowards among them.

MacDuffie had stationed armed men along the top of the long winding declivity that edged the string of mines and their half dozen machine guns pointed directly down toward the pits. Below, miners strolled aimlessly about, occasionally stopping for shouted, friendly conversations with members of the hospital staff.

Once Gleason went down into the mines and talked directly with the men, pleading with them to go back to work. They became angry when he defended Gordon. Gleason simply could not make them believe that the governor had not run away. When one of the miners swung on him, he wisely left before his stubborn persistence could lead to bloodshed and violence.

No one doubted his courage.

It was then that Dying Death cases started coming in again. Several cases appeared in the mines, and the miners started demanding medical aid. Crocker picked me for the job.

We had twenty-eight cases laid out like so many living cadavers in the hospital, and the ambulances hadn't been silent for hours. I refused to dwell on what I might find in the mines.

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I loaded up with medicine and equipment and stopped on the way out to kiss Janie good-bye. I couldn't help thinking it would probably be good-bye forever. She looked dead tired, and more than a little scared. She put her head on my shoulder and cried a little.

"Sam," she said wearily, "do you suppose Crocker or Hans could run a basal on me when they get a chance? I've been feeling awfully tired and uneasy lately, and I can't seem to shake this headache."

A cold fear came upon me. "Any other symptoms," I asked.

She held out her hands. They were trembling visibly.

I stepped quickly back a foot or two and flipped a pencil out of my pocket. "Catch!" I said.

The pencil dropped through the air. She made a frantic attempt to catch it—much too late and far too wide of the mark. I wanted to scream.

"What's the matter, Sam?" Crocker asked, a moment later at the door of the reception room.

"Janie, Doc." I was a grown man and a doctor and I'd seen a lot of people die of *mysteriosa*. But the thought of Janie going that way—

"Number twenty-nine," I said, and put my face in my hands.

Crocker closed his eyes for a moment, and put down his stethoscope. Shaeffer cursed, shrugged, and went on with his work.

"I'll get a cot," I said softly.

In a few moments we had her in bed. She'd known the minute I'd gone for Crocker what the trouble was. Now she just lay there, tears welling effortlessly out of her eyes, looking up at me in desperate appeal.

"I'm scared, Sam," she whispered.

"Don't be," I said, gently. "All our cards haven't been played yet."

She shook her head. "No, Sam, I've been through it with you, remember." She closed her eyes. "It's been wonderful, Sam."

"And it *will* be!" I said. I took her hand, which was shaking worse than ever now. "Darling, we'll take care of you. Darling, when we go back to Earth—"

"Earth?" She opened her eyes; and they seemed to stare a million miles away. "Oh, how wonderful! Earth! Blue skies and people and movies and music and everything like that . . . oh, yes, Sam, I *want* to go to Earth . . ."

Crocker straightened. "Sam, go to the mines," he said.

I stared at him. "Now? You expect me to—"

"Go to the mines. You're just in the way here. Stay there, until you hear from me." He was pushing me gently and the whole tone of his voice changed as he muttered fiercely, "I may yet make Charlie Gordon eat his words."

He turned away from me.

I went, but it wasn't easy. All I could think of as I trudged through the fog was Janie, lying unconscious, close to death. I could barely remember Crocker's parting words.

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VIII

Conditions in general at the mines were good. The men were eating well and things hadn't gotten dangerously out of hand.

They were good to me, providing me with meals from the food their families brought them every period without fail and making available a sleeping area—an elevator car packed with dirt for a mattress and my medicine bag for a pillow, which was, under the circumstances, reasonably comfortable.

We talked little, though, after the first couple of periods. They saw that I was doing what I could, which was just about nothing. They had one thought in mind, one overmastering desire. They wanted to see again the green hills and valleys of Earth.

I couldn't blame them.

In the thirteenth period of my stay, a mass meeting was held inside the main shaft, Number Four. I was not invited. Harry Griswold, the originally somewhat reluctant man who spoke for them, and who by now had had most of his reticence ground away by the constant presence of death, stalked out of the meeting grimly.

He was followed soon after by the others, who wandered casually to their usual places.

Griswold went out into the open area covered by MacDuffie's armed guards, and once again demanded release and a guaranteed return to Earth.

MacDuffie refused his request. "You know what my answer must be, Harry. You *know* I have to say no!"

Without replying, Harry Griswold spun about and stamped back into the mine. Two of the men, who had been standing near the entrance of the shaft puffing on cigarettes carefully hoarded from diminishing stores, straightened determinedly and came forward.

I stared at them in alarm. "Griswold," I said, "what's going on here?"

Griswold looked at me. "Doc. I'm sorry as hell." He shifted from one foot to the other, wiping a grimy hand across his bearded face. "We all appreciate what you've done." He inclined his head, and the two men seized my arms in crushing grips. "Unfortunately, Doc, you and Ahrens' five engineers seem to be our only tickets out of here."

I struggled, but not too hard, realizing that it would have been useless in any event. "Harry, you're crazy," I said. "You'll never get anywhere this way."

Griswold stared at me steadily. "It's try or die of a disease that's killing the whole settlement. I prefer trying." He whirled and shouted. "Hal! Bring up those engineers."

Another shout answered him.

Men started moving, purposefully for the first time since I had been with them. The other shafts quickly emptied, and the miners began to

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gather outside Number Four in a great restless mob.

I was dragged to the front, along with the engineers. I saw MacDuffie, who had been sitting, smoking a pipe, on the edge of the embankment, slowly rise to his feet.

"Harry!" he yelled. He stood silhouetted against the blazing brilliance of a bank of lights. "Don't try anything!"

Griswold licked his lips, wiped his forehead with his hand, and took two steps forward. "Mac, you can see what we've got down here. We've got Doc Smith and Ahrens' five engineers. In about nothing flat we're walking out of here. If you shoot, you'll have to shoot these boys first."

He turned slightly. "All right. Let's go."

We moved, the engineers and myself propelled relentlessly forward and up the embankment by the surging mob behind us. I held my breath. I hadn't the slightest idea of what MacDuffie would do. He was a calm, thoughtful man, but this was the sort of situation really to test a man's temperament.

After all, Griswold had been a shy nonentity a week before. For all I knew, MacDuffie might go out of his head and blast the whole lot of us with his ugly-looking machine-guns.

MacDuffie shook his fist. "Stay back, I warn you—stay back!"

"Go ahead, you lousy brasshat!" yelled somebody behind me. "Go ahead and shoot!"

The mob roared. We moved faster; I stumbled, fell on my face, and was dragged back to my feet. It seemed as if I could almost reach out and touch the machine-guns. And then in a moment quietly, and without fanfare, it was all over.

For the record, I'll make it straight. It didn't seem dramatic to any of us involved in it. Doc Crocker's arrival on the edge of the embankment was not deliberately planned. It wasn't in Doc to be theatrical. Of course, by the time the story had filtered back to Earth through the warpings and twistings of news agencies and feature writers it must have seemed as if there was an orchestra playing a theme song in the background.

But it wasn't like that at all. For me, it was relief from hell. My arms were hurting like the very devil where my captors' fingers were digging in, and I was sick from fright and from the dirt I had swallowed. I could hardly hear for the shouting and yelling that filled the air, and I could barely see MacDuffie against the dazzling glare of a night-light.

Suddenly, though, there was Doc Crocker, standing beside MacDuffie and squinting down at us. Abruptly the noise stopped, and my ears rang in the silence.

"Hello, Sam," he said, his voice tired. He scanned the crowd. "Is there a fellow here by the name of Sol Aronson?"

"So what?" came a growled reply.

MacDuffie was fidgetting, uncer-

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tain, his hand on a machine-gunner's shoulder.

"Are you Aronson?" called Crocker.

"Yeah. So what?"

"Go take a look at your wife."

"My wife's dead by now," came the snarling reply. "You killed her, with your stupid—"

Crocker smiled patiently. "She's in the ambulance, Sol, parked back here. Why not go to her? She needs you. She's still a little weak."

"Doc!" I screamed. "Doc—I checked Mrs. Aronson in myself—"

Doc scowled. "You men let him go. There's somebody'd like to see *him*, too."

Aronson was clambering over the edge now, and Crocker turned and watched him as he ran to the parked ambulance we could not see from the pit.

An eternity seemed to pass.

"Well?" called Crocker.

"Yes!" Aronson's voice was shrill. "It's true! It's true! She—"

The hands fell away from my arms. I scrambled toward Doc. "Janie, Doc . . . the others . . ."

Crocker put his hand on my shoulder. "They're all right, son, all right. And so is Janie." Once again he faced the crowd of men, now beginning to mill around excitedly. "I'm sorry we couldn't save them all. I remember a Mrs. Lewis. She's all right, too. At the hospital. Then there was Tom Longbow. He has a brother here, I think. He's doing well—"

That did it. They went nuts. That's the only word for it. They scattered in all directions. They streamed past us, a flood of excruciatingly happy men.

IX

It didn't take much pumping to get Crocker to tell me how he had cracked *mysteriosa*. He got most of it out, too, by the time we were back at the hospital, and I assure you I moved at a good clip.

"Oh, there's lots of angles," Crocker said, "angles we never even thought of. What a bunch of saps we were. 'Earth,' Janie said. 'I want to go back to Earth.' Like when Naguti and I were in Nigeria—"

"All right, all right, get to the point," I growled. "A lot of them said that."

"Absolutely. But when she said it, something about the context or the way she spoke—I don't know. But it hit me. So I checked. I found a few things which made my hunch seem more than just a hunch. For example, how many children came down with *mysteriosa?*"

"Why—" I stopped short. "Why, none! You know, it never occurred—"

His head bobbed. I plucked at his arm and we continued walking. "I hadn't thought about it either. Question number two: how many of the leaders, the people who really wanted the colony to succeed came down with it?" Before I could reply, he said decisively: "Same answer: none!"

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Crocker ticked his fingers. "Question number three: when did the last outburst occur?"

"Just after the trouble at the mines began," I managed to reply. I put on speed, because the hospital was looming directly ahead.

"Right, Sam. I observed, too, that most of the cases were women, outside of those among the strikers. Not too important, but a factor. But here was the clincher. How long did it take for *mysteriosa* to strike? Four years. And when it did the first victims were the people who had *been here the longest.*"

We were at the entrance to the hospital. "Doc, I never did like mystery stories. Where's Janie?"

"In her room."

We went through the swinging doors. Doc went on: "Back in the old days, Kreitcher and I did some experimental work with hypnosis. In connection with specific neuroses. Nothing came of it. But that set me to thinking about that research." He grinned. "I'll wait," he said as I rushed into Janie's room.

She was sitting, wrapped in a blanket and looking pale and weak. But she was alive and I knew she was going to be all right.

I put my arms around her and lifted her up to me. "Janie," I cried, "Janie."

"Sam," she said, after a while, "God bless Dr. Crocker, he's wonderful."

"Yes. Wonderful." I eased her back into the chair.

Doc came into the room and chuckled. "I was wondering if you'd forgotten about me. Poor Shaeffer. He's trying to handle the miners. They want to see—"

"Doc," I said, "I didn't like mystery stories."

"I hypnotized her."

"You hypnotized Janie."

"Yep. At first my method was too crude and direct. I just tried convincing her she was on Earth. That didn't take. It gave me some bad moments, too. But I got Ahrens and some of his boys to rig up some special equipment. We tried to synthesize what we could of a Terrestrial environment. Then I sort of plugged that into the hypnosis. That worked."

"Doc, are you trying to tell me—"

"We made recordings of the hypnotic patter and the sound effects we used, and rigged the other effects so they'd be automatic. We started giving the treatment to all the cases in the hospital, and especially to the new cases. It takes time, though. And some we just didn't get to in time. But the rest, like Janie, will come out of it perfectly fit. Maybe a little exhausted, but fit as a fiddle."

There was a noise outside. "Sam, I think we'd better help Hans," he said.

"Yes." I kissed Janie again and followed Crocker out of the room. I put my hand out and caught him. "Just one second, Doc, your dumb assistant doesn't get it. *I don't get it!*"

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"Damn it, man, how plain do I have to spell it? In the old days we used to talk about melancholia. A particular psychosis. It struck me how much like symptomatic melancholia *mysteriosa* was. Every symptom was present, except the history. These were well-balanced, hard-working people. But when I thought about what Janie said, I suddenly realized there was a history, an identical history for every victim."

He swept his hand in a wide arc. "This monotonous, dull, utilitarian society Gordon's constructed here, and which all of his imitators in the other colonies have copied, plus this alien environment, plus little nuances like slightly lesser gravity, the somewhat higher carbon dioxide percentage—all those things. *The presence of the patient on Venus was the history!*"

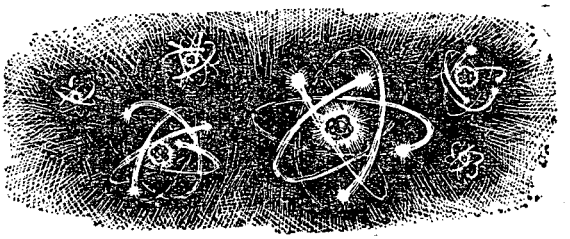
The switchboard was buzzing, and I went over and switched it on. It was Sparks, frantically calling from the tower. "Get me Crocker!" he gasped. "Gordon's ship is approaching. He wants to talk to Crocker—"

Doc overheard, and brushed me aside. "Sparks, tell him Dr. Nathan Crocker is too damned busy to talk to him. You may pass on my recommendation, however, that he take his fancy scientists back where he got them and bring instead some fragments of Earth to these poor souls. A couple of movie theatres, for example, and a little wasteful beauty instead of . . . oh, just tell him I said his people aren't ill. They're *homesick*."

IN A FEW years Hulbert, Venus, was a near metropolis of fifteen thousand people, the central city in a chain of towns scattered throughout American Venus, a jewel of colorful beauty blossoming in the midst of the jungle clearing that stretched for miles in all directions, a place of human beings and human hopes and the vacation spot for the wealthy of Earth, a transplanted bit of Earth whose charm was that it remained distinctly Venusian.

Janie and I returned to Earth right away, where we were married. But human nature is funny. We didn't stay long on Earth. Before the year was out, we were back on Venus.

Homesick . . .



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free will

by . . . Dal Stivens

No stranger ghost had ever walked a daffydill lane in search of a chum. But the robot wasn't buying.

A ROBOT was trundling along to its cubicle one night in 2500 A.D. when it met a ghost. The color of the ghost was not remarkable but was merely the traditional vapory gray. What was unusual was its shape. It was that of a robot with a cylindrical body and round, segmented limbs.

The ghost crooked a claw at the robot and cried: "Hey, bud, I want a word with you!"

"Not with me!" said the robot quickly and took to its wheels.

When it had clanked a good three hundred yards away it slowed and confided to itself, "Well, that certainly was odd and I did right to run as my makers intended me to do when confronted with anything strange. A human ghost is all very well, but who ever heard of a robot ghost? Only things with souls are supposed to have ghosts and robots have no souls—or so I have been taught. Of course, it would be interesting if robots had souls—"

The robot had not observed that the ghost had flitted ahead and taken up a fresh position directly in his path.

We've mentioned before that Dal Stivens seems to have snatched the cloak of La Fontaine and donned it with a wry chuckle, whistling the meanwhile to lure winsome little animals and "tough guy" goblins from the enchanted glow of twentieth-century magic casements. It's conceivable that Mr. Stivens' boy-meets-girl audience—he's crashed a major "slick paper" publication—would be a little stunned by a robot *ghost. But we prefer to be audacious.*

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"You don't get rid of me as easily as all that, bud!" The ghost waved his claw at the robot. "You're a scarey type, aren't you?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" asked the robot. He whirred up, preparatory to taking off again. "You aren't supposed to exist and—"

"I do, bud," said the ghost, "and that's all that counts. Don't move off, bud. Harmless as a kitten, that's me. I wouldn't harm a single coil. I've got a proposition for you—that's all."

The robot fed all this through his photo-electric cells and then announced, "All right, I'll listen. Besides, I don't think my batteries could stand another sprint. But before you start talking, I must say that I am greatly puzzled. Robots don't have souls—"

"That's what you think, bud," said the ghost. "I was a robot and now I'm a ghost. Therefore, pally, I must have had a soul. Cor, you talk like a schoolmaster. Still, I can't be choosy."

"Granting that you exist, for the basis of our discussion," said the robot. "What's your proposition?"

"Just this, bud. I'm lonely. I want a pal. I'm the only robot ghost and it's lonesome."

"I am distressed for you," said the robot. "But what can I possibly do to help?"

"Just this, bud, and I'm asking it as a favor—you become a ghost and join me."

"Not on your life," said the robot, indignantly. "I'm not taking any risks." He added reflectively, "Though, mind you, the notion of having a soul does appeal to me. But suppose I just found myself on the junk heap without a soul. I'd feel a bit silly, wouldn't I? A lot of robots have to die, come to the end of the period of their usefulness. But you are the only one to my knowledge to have acquired a soul."

"That's a bit of a curly one, bud," said the ghost, on reflection. "I can't have you taking unnecessary risks on my behalf."

"Mind you, I must say I'm almost tempted to take the risk," said the robot. "I'd like to think there was more to life than my dreary mechanical existence. The notion of being a ghost and having, ipso facto, a soul tempts me."

"Can't let you take any risks, bud," said the ghost, shaking his head. "Wouldn't be right. There must be a safe way if I'm not too thick in the nut." He faded until he was almost lost against the night. He was thinking hard and the concentration lessened the intensity of his ectoplasm. After half a minute the outline of the robot ghost grew firmer.

"Got it all figured out, bud!" he cried. "Easy as E. S. P. All you've got to do is get yourself murdered by your boss, same as me, and then you can't miss on being a ghost. Simple as anything why I'm here. It's so I can haunt him. Frighten hell out of him every night." The robot spirit chuckled.

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"My owner is a nice man," said the robot. "It mightn't be easy to get him to murder me."

"So was my boss until I decided not to do what he told me and handed him a few home truths as well."

"You must have developed free will."

"Of course, bud," said the ghost scornfully.

The robot scratched his head until it rang. "I don't know that I could do that. It seems rather impossible."

"Not if you want to," said the ghost. "Nothing is but wishing makes it so."

"It's not as easy as you make it sound."

The ghost who had grown quite bright now faded until he was a dim outline and stayed that way for over a minute. Then he grew almost incandescent.

"Got it, pally!" he cried. "I'll tamper with your photo-electric cells and make you go haywire. Keep still and I'll do it now!"

He wavered up to the robot and put out a limb. It passed right through the robot. He tried again three times and then went and sat down on the ground. He shone very brightly as he sighed, "I should have realized that. You'll have to do it yourself. Self help is the best."

"These words are strange to me but I like the sound of them," said the robot. "I will get myself murdered!"

"Atta boy!" said the robot ghost.

After a few more words the robot and the ghost parted, agreeing to meet at the same place on the following evening.

"You don't have to tell me you have failed," the ghost greeted the robot the next night. "I can see that for myself."

"I did my best and it was a damned good best," said the robot. "I told my master that I was tired of working for him, that I had a will of my own and that I intended to please myself and get a bit of fun out of life. I added that I was no mechanical being but a creature with a soul. I also told him that I was fed up with listening to his whining voice and looking at his undistinguished face, and that though I might have no ancestors I was spared the knowledge that they had swung by their tails."

"That should have fixed him!" said the ghost admiringly. "He ought to have attacked you straightway. Mine did before I said half as much."

"You don't know my owner," said the robot. "He was delighted. He shook me by the hand and he is going to take me to the authorities. He says it's the greatest thing that has ever happened in robot mechanics!"

"That's torn it!" said the ghost.

"I am afraid so," said the robot. "There are owners and owners."

The ghost faded almost away and

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then reappeared. "Has your boss a wife, bud?" he asked.

"Of course."

"You could make him mad if you hung your hat up there."

"I'll try, but I hope I'm not getting too ambitious," said the robot.

"Wishing makes it so, bud," said the ghost. "It's sewn up, now."

They parted, agreeing to meet twenty-four hours later.

During the day, however, the ghost grew impatient. He transported himself to the robot and asked: "What joy, bud?"

"She likes me," said the robot, a little shortly. "It is all rather extraordinary."

"How do you mean, bud?"

"The feeling," said the robot. "I think I like it too. Very unusual."

"I told you you could do it, bud," said the ghost, and vanished.

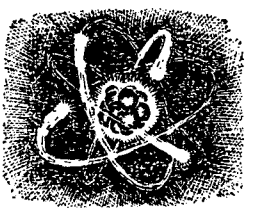
"Don't tell me you've failed again, bud," the ghost greeted the robot that night.

"I succeeded and the boss was delighted," said the robot tersely. "His scientific interest has got the best of his other interests."

"We are beaten, aren't we?" said the ghost.

"You are," said the robot. "I'm not. I like it the way it is. I have no intention of becoming a ghost now. Things just couldn't be any better!"

And he turned on his wheel and clunked off very fast with the help of the extra batteries he had fitted that day, while the ghost shouted ineffectually after him.



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operation triplan

by . . . Mack Reynolds

He had made the first Lunar trip and at thirty he was a legendary figure. But to a legend may come a summons beyond the call of duty.

HAROLD HOTCHKISS, so-called hatchetman of President Corcoran, waved Jeff Stevens toward a chair at the heavy conference table. He said, "Back during the war the joke was to point out several men and say, 'I want volunteers—you, you and *you*.' I'm afraid that's the situation you now find yourself in, Major."

Stevens said, "I wondered what this was all about. Now I know. I've volunteered for something." He paused, before adding, "I would have thought I'd done my share of volunteering."

Hotchkiss nodded his agreement, and stared at the other earnestly, almost pleadingly. "You're our most experienced man, Major. We find ourselves in a position . . ." He cut it off.

Jeff Stevens looked at him.

The general, seated off to the side, cleared his throat apologetically as if to say that this was not of his doing.

The president's right-hand man came to his feet and approached a large scale mercator projection of the world which hung on an otherwise bare wall. His back to the

Having gained considerable distinction as a collaborator with Fredric Brown and other top-echelon experts in interstellar exploration and the mystery-writing craft Mack Reynolds is singularly equipped to shine in his own light as an accomplished science fantasy writer. And shine he does in this fast-paced, starkly realistic saga of space hazards incalculable.

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other two, he regarded it momentarily and then said, as though to himself, "There have been a good many changes here in less than two decades."

He turned and faced them. "The second world war has never really ended. Hardly had the common enemies collapsed than the United Nations split into two camps and entered into what was termed a *cold war.*"

"*Frigid fracas* the tabloids are calling it now," Jeff Stevens said, but without unbending.

"At any rate, the situation continues and possibly it is best that our world has split so evenly into the Eastern Confederation and the Western Alliance. Now we are so balanced that neither of us has the advantage. Neither of us seems to be able to achieve the prestige which would bring the few remaining neutrals to his side and thus gain dominant strength and the confidence to initiate armed conflict on a world scale."

Stevens shifted his slight body in his chair.

Harold Hotchkiss looked from Stevens to the general and then back again, and continued to cover ground as familiar to his listeners as to himself.

"Both sides are developing their science, their industry. Both camps trying to impress the neutrals, the all-important neutrals. A few years ago the Eastern Confederation established the first space station and temporarily led in scientific prestige. However, within weeks we were able to counteract their moves by establishing the first Lunar base, as you well know, Major."

Stevens stirred again, not concealing his irritation. *Who* was telling *whom* what?

"But now they are about to reach out still further. The totally unexpected has happened."

Major Jeff Stevens sat suddenly erect. "How was that?"

Hotchkiss took out his handkerchief and held it to his mouth momentarily, then replaced it in his pocket. "The Confederation is about to send out an exploring expedition to the other planets."

"Then they've got atomic propulsion!"

"And are years ahead of us," the general added, tonelessly, speaking for the first time since Stevens' entrance.

"The thing I want to stress," Hotchkiss went on, "is that if they are successful in being the first to reach Mars or Venus, their prestige will shoot sky-high. Man has dreamed of reaching out into space for so long that such an achievement would have far-reaching effect. We can't afford to have them precede us."

He came to his feet and stared down at the diminutive spaceman for a long silent moment.

"You're our most experienced man," he said, and then he added, "General Smyth will take over from here." He turned and shuffled from the room, an aged and tired man.

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The New Mexican spaceport was familiar.

Almost, Jeff Stevens felt a stimulation at the sight of the concrete aprons with their *Neptunes* nestled in their two step rockets and waiting to be fired spaceward. It seemed such a short time ago that he, with five others, each in his own ship, had blasted off for the first attempt at Lunar. He alone, of the six of them, had made it.

He alone had returned.

For a moment the vexation arose in him again. *That they had the gall to call on him once more.* He suppressed his resentment only with an effort.

There had been considerable development in the past few years. The Lunar base now supported a dozen men, and, circling the Earth was a space station, an artificial satellite, with its own crew of ten or more. At least once or twice a month a craft took off for one or the other of the Space Service's two bases.

Yes, things had developed—but not to the point where an attempt at Mars and Venus was practical. It was an act of desperation, and the rhetoric of a Harold Hotchkiss, and the brisk efficiency of a General Smyth couldn't disguise that fact. Nor was Jeff Stevens kidding himself.

Upon his arrival at the spaceport he was immediately hustled through all gates, past all guards, and assigned to a *Neptune* for the trip to the space station. The messenger who came scooting up on a motorcycle all but missed him.

He saluted and said breathlessly, "Package for Major Stevens."

Jeff Stevens weighed it in his hand, frowning. It was about the size of a shoebox and there was an envelope attached. He opened it and read: *To be opened and used in case of extreme emergency during Operation Triplan. Good luck! Harold Hotchkiss.*

"Probably a dehydrated lifeboat or some such," he growled inwardly. Then he turned to the pilot. "Come on, Lieutenant, let's go."

He didn't recognize the pilot. That was the Space Service for you, expanding so rapidly you couldn't keep track of them all.

The lieutenant gave him detailed instruction on belting himself into his gimbal-surrounded acceleration chair. Then he said, "We'll be spaceborne in a moment, sir. You'll probably black out for a few minutes, but it won't make any difference. We'll have a little more than four G's for a period of perhaps eight minutes before reaching *Brennschluss.* Then we'll hit free fall. Now that's where it's going to bother you at first, Major. You . . ."

"Listen," Jeff Stevens growled. "My name is Stevens. Didn't you know?"

"Stevens?"

Jeff Stevens had to grin, in spite of himself. "I made the first Lunar trip, Lieutenant."

The eyes of the pilot widened.

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"Oh. Oh, *that* Major Stevens." He stared, unbelievingly.

What was he, an historic personage already, Jeff Smith thought bitterly. Hell, he was barely in his middle thirties.

That first thrill he'd had of taking off into space for the initial time was returning now. Jeff Stevens could almost *feel* valves opening, pumps beginning to stir, the liquid hydrogen and the ozone beginning to gush into the booster which would lift the ship off the ground.

A low roar began, audible even within the titanium alloy hull. It swelled ponderously, thunderously, penetratingly.

The pilot said, under his breath, "Rocket away!" as their acceleration chairs gave easily beneath them.

The booster device was lifting the heavy mass of the *Neptune* and its two step rockets sluggishly from the apron. In seconds it would fall away and the first step would take over.

Uneasy fear washed over them, brought on by the subsonic vibrations. The rocket motors set up sounds from all the registers the ear could detect, but it hadn't halted there. The human ear couldn't pick up the subsonic notes but the fear that accompanies them was present.

Jeff Stevens, with the experience of the veteran, remained impassive, but the face of the young pilot went ashen. Stevens wanted to shout to him, "It'll be over in a few minutes." But he restrained himself. It would only embarrass the fledgling.

They felt the rockets diminish in sound, then swell again, even as they slipped into a gray-out from the acceleration. Step rocket one had reached its *Brennschluss* and fallen away, and step rocket two had taken over. It wouldn't be long now. They must have already reached the point where Earth's atmosphere had thinned out to nothingness. They were theoretically in space.

The Western Alliance's space station was located approximately 22,300 miles above the surface of the Earth—located at that distance so that it "circled" the world once in twenty-four hours, or, in other words, remained above the same spot, since the Earth's revolution exactly offset it. It would take them less than an hour in free fall before they reached their destination.

Jeff Stevens appreciated that. At least they wouldn't have the full four days in free fall that it took to make Lunar. Then he caught himself. Lunar? He wasn't going to Lunar. He had a year and a half of free fall before him. He wondered whether or not the human body could stand that. There was no particular reason to think it wouldn't. But, on the other hand, no particular reason to think it would.

He felt the familiar sensation beginning to come over him. They'd reached *Brennschluss* of the *Nep-*

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tune now. The acceleration was falling off, not all at once, of course, but rapidly. The grayness swept away and breathing became easier. The free fall was upon them.

He said, "I should have enjoyed that four gravities while it lasted. It's the last gravity I'm going to feel for a long time."

The pilot looked at him questioningly. "Where are you going, sir? There's gravity on Lunar. Not much, I grant you, but gravity."

Jeff Stevens had said too much. "Top secret, Lieutenant. Very hush, hush." His tone didn't invite further questioning.

He was sorry he'd made that slip. It wouldn't do for the pilot to be curious. General Smyth had made it clear that if it became known the attempt was being made, and it then failed, instead of prestige there would be an unfortunate negative effect. If he failed, the world would never know of his attempt, he realized, and the realization didn't improve his bitterness about the whole project.

As a matter of fact, the *Alice* was somewhat more than Jeff Stevens had expected, but still considerably less than he had hoped for. The spaceship was more advanced in several respects than anything else the service had developed thus far. But it was still pitifully inadequate for the job at hand.

It was somewhat larger than the *Neptune* in which he'd arrived at the space station, but not outstandingly so. After all, the *Alice* had had to lift herself from Earth before she could reach this space station at all, and that had limited her size and capacity. Only minor alterations had been possible here.

To his surprise, one of the changes made in her, out here in space, had been to rip out two of the fuel tanks. One of the engineers explained it to him. Actually, less fuel would be needed for the full year and a half trip than it had taken to make the initial flight from Earth to the station. The idea was that you pointed yourself in the direction of your goal, blasted for a few minutes and then "coasted" the rest of the way.

The space formerly utilized for fuel was converted to pumpkin plants and hydroponic tanks, and, to a small extent, to living quarters. It was the size of the living quarters that made Stevens inwardly quail and curse himself for ever accepting the assignment Hotchkiss and Smyth had offered.

The compartment was about the size of a Pullman bedroom, and in it were crowded a bunk, a chair, a tiny folding table, cooking and toilet facilities. All over the walls were gauges, instruments, radio and navigational equipment. The only possible escape would be back into the narrow aisles between the growing plants in the hydroponic tanks.

A year and a half of this!

He inspected the *Alice* together with three of the space station's

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technicians and its commanding officer and there was largely silence between them.

He said finally, sourly, "Snug, isn't it?"

The colonel had remained quiet thus far. Now he said softly, "There's still time to back out, Major. Maybe it's a little late, but it's still possible. From what the general said, all that would happen is that they'd have to keep you under wraps until they released the information that the trip was being made. They'd find somebody else." He didn't seem to be very convinced about it himself.

Jeff Stevens said disgustedly, "No. I'm going. My roof must be leaking, but I'm going."

The hydroponic expert had left them to give the tanks a checking. He called back from the inner chamber, "I hope you like corn, peas and stringbeans, Major, because your diet is going to consist of just that almost exclusively for some time."

"I'm a meat and potatoes man," Stevens growled unhappily.

Why was he doing this? Why? Hadn't he taken his chance on the Lunar venture? Why should he risk his neck again? Before, six men had started out and he alone had survived. If anything, the odds looked worse this time.

He shrugged it off. "All right," he said suddenly. "Let's find out what's holding us up."

The astrogator, an old-timer who had known him for years, looked up from his perusal of the pocket sized books of the meager library. They were made of tissue-thin paper and were coverless to conserve weight. "The way it figures out, Jeff, you ought to wait another twenty-four hours at least. Mars is in pretty good opposition this time but—"

Jeff Stevens nodded. "You're the boss, Ray. Twenty-four hours it is. Let's get back to the space station and see if you've got any liquor aboard."

"A very sound plan, Major," the colonel told him.

Jeff Stevens had hoped that the first few months would be the hardest and that from then on he'd settle into a routine undoubtedly monotonous but at least bearable. It didn't particularly work out that way.

Of course, life did fit into a routine. There was comparatively little to do, but he saw it was done. It would have been too easy for him to have sunk into complete ennui had he allowed it.

There were the hydroponic tanks to keep supplied with water and chemicals and correctly lighted. There were the pumpkin plants to be kept controlled in their most vital production of oxygen. There was the distilling purifier, which over and over again used the moisture thrown off by his body to condense from the air, to purify, to distill, to return to the water tanks to be used again.

There was the preparation of

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meals, and then there was a certain amount of astrogation.

"Actually," his astrogation instructor had told him, "it really isn't so far off from the celestial navigation that they use in ships and aircraft. The variation was worked out by a Dr. R. S. Richardson back before the second war.

"Say we take a star, Regulus, for instance, a nice first magnitude baby which is situated pretty well in the Solar System's plane. You measure the angle formed by Regulus, the ship, and the sun. The star, of course, is motionless as far as we're concerned, so the angle gives us our position. Next you work out a triangle between the sun, the planet you're aiming at, and the ship.

"Okay. Now in the Astrogation Almanac here, we find the distance of the planet from the sun for that particular time—we still have to use chronometers, even in interplanetary navigation—and we have all the material we need. We know one side, and we can figure all the angles. Simple geometry gives you your distance from your goal. Work your triangle around the other way and you can find out how far you've come from Earth, or, for that matter, how far you are from any body in the Solar System."

There were other things that kept him busy. The books, the cards for playing solitaire, the music records, and his own attempts at drawing, music, writing.

But time was heavy.

He lay on his bunk, buckled himself in against the weightlessness, stared at the overhead, and debated for a full half hour what he'd think about. It had got to that, by now. He'd divided his life, his actual experiences, his vicarious experiences via books, the theatre, radio, the conversation of others, into a finite number of cross indexed sections, each very clear in his mind. And now he could spend long moments of the dullness just thinking about what to recall, what to choose, among all the things he'd already recalled over and over again.

Did he feel in the mood for bitterness?

There was the fact that Hotchkiss and Smyth had chosen him, from the several scores of available space pilots, when he'd already done his share and more.

Nostaglia?

There was his childhood. Mother. Father, faintly remembered. School years' friends.

Romantic memories?

There was Alice, for whom he'd named the ship. There was always Alice, the unattainable Alice. It was possible to think of the others who had been before her. The casual affairs. The more important ones. A girl here, a girl there. This one who had been more than averagely attractive. That one who had been particularly frank in bed. But it always came back to Alice.

He wrenched his mind from that trend of thought and decided to go back over his scene with General Smyth, after Harold Hotchkiss had

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left them alone—so long ago, it seemed, there in the office in the Pentagon.

General Smyth had cleared his throat and come to his feet. "As Mr. Hotchkiss pointed out, Major, the problem is to get there first."

Jeff Stevens had stared at him. He hadn't conditioned himself to the idea as yet. "You mean you expect us to reach Mars or Venus with no more than our present equipment?" he demanded. "Without atomic fuel for power?"

"Not *us*," the general said, without looking at him. "Just *you*. You're going to have to do it alone, Major. No room for a larger crew." He went to a chart on a wall, a blown-up diagram of the Solar System and indicated it with a thumb.

"This is going to be a bluff, you might say. Remember during the war when Jimmy Doolittle bombed Tokyo? That was a bluff with more value as propaganda both at home and abroad than of damage to the enemy. It was a quick attack that couldn't be followed up and every plane that participated was destroyed either by the Japs or in landing in China.

"Frankly, Major, we can't go either to Mars or Venus, land, and then return to Earth. Atomic propulsion would be needed for that and all we have is chemical fuel. But we *can* go to *both* Venus and Mars, circle them and then return, with our present equipment."

Jeff Stevens protested. "I'm confused. What—"

The general said, "You see, Major, the trip to Mars would take about two hundred and fifty-eight days. But by the time you arrived it would not just be a matter of turning about and returning. Earth travels faster in its orbit about the sun than does Mars. And by the time you were ready to return, Earth would be on the opposite side of Sol. The spaceship would just have to wait at Mars until the Earth was in opposition again. The wait would last four hundred and fifty-five days. Then the return trip would take another two hundred and fifty-six days."

Jeff Stevens said, "About two years and eight months for the whole trip." He shook his head. "Alone for almost three years. It doesn't make any difference how much we need prestige, General. It couldn't be done. One man couldn't take it."

The general ignored him and went on. "A round trip to Venus would be somewhat less. The trip out would take one hundred and forty-six days, then you'd have a wait of four hundred and seventy days, and then there'd be the one hundred and forty-six days to get back. Altogether, two years and a month."

Jeff Stevens said slowly but emphatically, "Either trip is impossible. If nothing else, two years is too long a period for a man to remain in the cramped quarters; not to mention food and oxygen re-

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quirements. But to attempt to go to *both* Mars and Venus—"

The general smiled sourly. "A combination of the two would take a considerably shorter time, to accomplish than either one alone, Major.

"You see, we'd use the Walter Hohmann Round Trip for Operation Triplan. The ship would first proceed to Mars, but it wouldn't land, nor would it remain in orbit around Mars for the four hundred and fifty-five days. Instead, it would circle Mars for a few weeks and then head out for Venus. Venus would be circled for a few weeks and by then Earth would be in position for a return. The whole project would take about a year and a half. Dr. Hohmann worked it all out in his *Die Erreichbarkeit der Himmelskörper* long before space travel was an actuality."

It began to sound more possible at that. Mars travels slower than Earth, Venus travels faster. Since Mars is nearer the sun and Venus further away than our planet. The ship would take advantage of that situation.

Jeff Stevens said, "Wait a minute, now. As I get it, the government wants me to take a ship powered by present fuels and take off for a tri-planetary exploration in which I'd circle *both* Mars and Venus but land on neither."

"That's right," the general confirmed. "It would be impossible to land and then take off again. You wouldn't have the fuel for it."

Stevens snorted. "I won't have fuel for this deal either, as far as I can see. It's all we can do to get a ship to the moon with our present fuels."

General Smyth said briskly, "We've figured it all out, Stevens. The craft you use will be taken up to our space station and there refueled. In that manner we'll escape the necessity of burning precious fuel in take-off from Earth, which, of course, would ordinarily be the main expenditure. You'll also have a step rocket for your initial velocity. There will be ample fuel. None extra, but ample."

It was still fantastic. "But the food, the water, the air?"

The general smiled. "There will be pumpkin plants to produce oxygen, there will be hydroponic tanks to augment your dehydrated foods. You'll be self-sufficient for the period you're gone."

He had sat silently then for a long time before asking the next question. By this time he knew it was no mistake, no joke. The Western Alliance was desperate, and he was expendable.

MARS grew slowly in the sky before him, and that, at least, was something. Each time he arose from his bunk, after sleep, he was able to go to the small but powerful telescope and decide that for himself.

"She does seem to be nearer."

He'd got to that point now. He talked to himself. And answered.

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And the time came when he made his observations as usual and murmured with some surprise, "I thought Mars had only two moons."

Not that he needed to, the information was branded on his mind along with everything else known about the red planet. But he went to his condensed encyclopedia and looked it up.

"Only two," he grunted in confirmation, "both of them tiny. Phobos, nearly six thousand miles off Mars, and Deimos, about fourteen thousand five hundred miles off.

"And they're tiny enough," he added. "Phobos is only about ten miles in diameter, the other one's about half of that."

He went back to the telescope. "This one is smaller still. Maybe that's why they haven't picked it up before."

Jeff Stevens kept his eye glued to the glass for what must have been hours. Finally he put it down and laughed without humor. "Harold Hotchkiss," he said, "and you, General Smyth. I've got bad news for you. The Eastern Confederation ship is already here and already in orbit around Mars."

The significance of it suddenly dawned upon him. They hadn't developed an atomic fuel as had been thought. All they had was chemical fuel. They, too, were using the Hohmann Round Trip for an Operation Triplan of their own.

"They must've started earlier than I did," he muttered and took up the telescope again. The craft seemed larger than his own.

At least there was time and time aplenty to think everything out. He went back to the bunk and sprawled there, but instead of constructive thought, waves of bitterness flooded over him. All this. All this he had been through. All he had been subjected to by Hotchkiss and Smyth and their bid for prestige. And what was the result of his sacrifices, the endangering of his life a thousand times over? This . . .

He finally shook it off savagely and brought himself before his radio. He picked up the speaker and flicked switches.

They had anticipated this, those in the other ship. A voice immediately came on, a voice heavy with a middle European accent.

Calling Western Alliance spaceship. New Petrograd, *calling Western Alliance spaceship. Come in.*

Jeff Stevens answered carefully. Alice *calling* New Petrograd. *Come in,* New Petrograd.

He flicked over and his speaker blared. *What has taken you so long,* Alice? *According to our agents you left weeks before us but we have been here already for many days. Over.*

Even over the reaches of space, the taunt was there in the voice.

His lips felt tight. He took the mike and said, *Greetings from the crew of the* Alice, New Petrograd. *Your agents must be mistaken. Our agents tell us you started considerably sooner. Over.*

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Security! He snorted disgustedly. The Easterners weren't bluffing. They'd known of his attempt and had hurried up their own expedition. Damn Hotchkiss and Smyth for bunglers!

The speaker blared. *You attempt to fool us,* Alice. *We know you started first. Undoubtedly you still use the inferior fuels hydrogen and ozone. Over.*

A cold finger worked its way up his spine. He kept his voice even, flicked the set over and said, *Don't tell us you have developed atomic power. If so, you wouldn't have to remain in orbit around Mars. You would have enough power to land and take off again and you would have sufficient acceleration to arrive here and return during one opposition. Over.*

Never had time dragged so slowly as this over the past months. Finally came the answer, the other voice jovial now. *We did not claim to have atomic power,* Alice, *but we have progressed beyond hydrogen and ozone. We have developed monatomic hydrogen and, we assure you, the advantage is impressive. Call us again in twenty-four hours,* Alice. *We are both far from home.* The voice added, maliciously. *In a way, of course, you are even further from home than we since we will be back months the sooner.*

Jeff Stevens slumped into his chair and stared at the set. His hand went out to the encyclopedia. He read aloud, "Monatomic hydrogen in which each atom is independent instead of being tied to another hydrogen atom to form a molecule. It gives a theoretical exhaust velocity of twenty-one thousand meters a second. Ordinary hydrogen has a theoretical exhaust velocity of five thousand, one hundred and seventy meters per second."

He put the book carefully in its place.

"They're right," he told himself aloud. "They'll get home sooner. They'll have to wait around Mars the same as I will until Venus is in the right spot, and then, after they get to Venus they'll have to wait there until Earth is in line again, but it's on the home stretch they'll shoot ahead. They might make it two months before I do."

But was there no solution?

Was there any way of bringing them down?

No. There were no spacecraft, as far as he knew, fitted for interspacial warfare. But even if there were, the *Alice* certainly wasn't designed to destroy another space vessel.

There was no solution, and he knew it. And he knew that if the *New Petrograd* returned before him, the fact that the *Alice* had also made the trip would be almost meaningless.

He sat there, unthinking, staring unseeingly, for what might have been hours. Finally, and almost inadvertently, his hand went out to open a compartment door. He brought forth the package the messenger had delivered to him

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from Hotchkiss—*to be opened and used in case of extreme emergency . . .*

He unwrapped it. A bottle of stone age cognac. With it was another note.

I am sorry, son. It is not easy for a sick old man to send a young man to his death. Not even for a great cause. Let me say that I am very humble, and grateful in the name of our people who must never know that Operation Triplan was attempted, now that it has failed. Your death is for us all, but only a few can know of it . . . HAROLD HOTCHKISS.

Jeff Stevens grunted. The old boy had guessed that an extreme emergency on Operation Triplan would mean curtains. Well . . .

Both ships were in orbit now and only a few score miles apart. They swung silently around Mars, the red planet, waiting for the time when Venus would come nearest them and they could blast off in her direction. And once every twenty-four hours they exchanged radio messages.

Jeff Stevens managed to keep it on a friendly basis, in spite of their thinly-veiled taunts, their boasting, their heavy sneering attempts at humor at the expense of the *Alice* and of the Western Alliance.

There were four of them in the crew of the *New Petrograd* and Jeff Stevens kept up the pretense that there were even more than that number in the *Alice*. He didn't exactly know why, but the first inklings of a plan were forming in his mind.

As the weeks passed he sipped Harold Hotchkiss' cognac very carefully and with appreciation and he thought it out very carefully.

And while he waited he checked, to the extent possible with the instruments aboard, the surface conditions of the planet beneath him. The data accumulated by Earth's astronomers over the years was surprisingly accurate. Mass, density, volume, diameter, orbital velocity, period of rotation. The atmosphere was thin, certainly too thin to support human life, but there was moisture and a certain amount of vegetation. He couldn't tell from this distance whether or not there was animal life.

"A helluva spot for either us or the Eastern Confederation," he snorted aloud. "You'd think both sides were nuts for even trying to reach the place."

Slowly, the time for departure for Venus approached. Within an hour of the time his own calculations called for leaving on the next leg of the operation, he detected the *New Petrograd*'s jets.

He flicked on his set and the other craft answered almost immediately. *You of the West are tardy,* the voice said, its mockery ill-concealed. *Our calculations show it is time to leave for Venus. We will see you there later,* Alice. *Over.*

Jeff Stevens took up the mike and threw the switch over. *Good luck,* New Petrograd. *Our calculations*

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are—different. He flicked the switch off.

He stood there a full minute looking at the set. "Yeah," he said aloud. "Good luck, *New Petrograd.* You're going to need it when you get back."

Talking easily to himself, he sat down at the tiny desk to compose the message he intended to send to Earth. "Let's see. We'll continue in this orbit for a few more weeks. Long enough so that it would be impossible for them to watch us in their telescopes. Then . . ."

He wet the end of the pencil and composed the note carefully. Security, of course, was out now. The fat, so to speak, was in the fire. Soon, all Earth would be in the know.

He read the message aloud:

HAVE LANDED MARS AND TAKEN POSSESSION IN NAME OF WESTERN ALLIANCE STOP AWAIT REINFORCEMENTS STOP SIGNED STEVENS OFFICER COMMANDING FORT MARS UNITED STATES SPACE SERVICE.

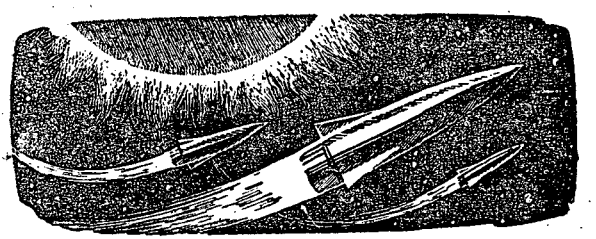
He considered it and nodded his approval. "Of course, I don't have the fuel to take off again, once I land, but I should be able to live in *Alice* for a long time, maybe even —not very likely, of course—until they, somehow, send a ship that *can* land and take off again."

He reached out for a glass and the bottle of cognac and poured himself a sparing half ounce.

"Yes, sir," he said. "In a few months the *New Petrograd* will be making its return to Earth from Venus, planning on startling the world with the fact that it made a trip around Mars and Venus. And just about when they're ready to land, I'll send this message."

He sipped his brandy and read the message again.

"Wonderful brandy," he said appreciatively. "Hotchkiss is a man of rare understanding. Well, he wanted to have prestige to maintain peace and the balance of power on Earth. So he'll have his prestige. Perhaps its first colonist will never see his home planet again, but Jeff Stevens, old friend, the Western Alliance will shortly have the first colony of Earth on another world."



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fresh pastures

by . . . Garnett Radcliffe

The Famine was far more terrible than the World Wars which had preceded it. But one woman on Earth had the bravest of husbands.

It was a converted farmhouse built before 1950 and its only modernized feature was a raised platform built above the sloping roof for the benefit of the tradesmen's hover-vans. Inside, one room had been re-wired for dimensional viewing. Apart from those changes the house was much as it had been in the middle of the twentieth century.

The day commenced for Hetty Marcham, the owner of the house, with a minor annoyance. She was a young widow and the mother of three children. A little more than a month previously she had lost her husband.

The minor annoyance concerned the milk-van. The pilot told her she would be getting a half-pint less in the future. He was sorry, but it wasn't his fault.

"It's this World Famine," he explained. "How can cows give milk when they're not getting proper food?"

"But according to the Food Distribution Regulations I'm *entitled* to three pints a day!" Hetty protested.

"Well, I'm afraid the cows can't have read the Regulations. But I'm sorry. I am really . . . I mean, you

This is a very quiet story. Two isolated women living for the moment in the aftermath of a world tragedy explore relationships tragically intertwined with a grief, and pain and fear which has become almost unendurable And out of the quietness emerges drama—and a quality of suspense so stirring to the mind and heart that Garnett Radcliffe's gift to us will be treasured.

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with three young children and losing the Commander so recently . . . He was a fine man . . . Didn't he build the platform with his own hands?"

"Yes," Hetty said proudly. "He could do anything."

"He made a good job of the platform. Well, I must be flapping along. I'll have a word with the boss to see if he can't let you have another half-pint."

"Thank you," Hetty said.

After the milk-van had gone growling on its way she remained on the platform, her eyes following a distant bird. When she'd decided it really *was* a bird, she sighed in relief and descended the steps leading to the interior of the house.

Her aunt had got the children up and was giving them their breakfast. She was a tiny short-sighted woman, as brisk as a bee at seventy. She too had known sorrow in her youth. Her fiancé, a fighter-pilot in the Last War, had been another who had not returned.

"Good morning, Hetty," she said. "There's mutiny on the lower-deck this morning. Douglas won't eat his bean-toast."

"Then he should be put in irons," Hetty said. "Why won't you eat your nice bean-toast, Douglas?"

"Wan' bread," said Douglas. He was four years old and had his father's curly hair and obstinate blue eyes.

"You can't have bread," Valerie, who was ten and serious, told him. "Bread's rationed because of the famine."

Douglas's retort was to fling a piece of bean-toast at his sister. Hetty thought *He wouldn't have done that if Eric had been here,* and restored peace by the rather cowardly subterfuge of giving her son a piece of her own bread ration.

When the children had departed in the school hover-bus she looked at her mail, which was considerable. Letters of condolence from people she had never heard of were still arriving. There was a thick, registered letter from Eric's solicitor which she knew would contain forms to be filled out in connection with her pension.

A bishop had written making suggestions for a memorial service. The Famine Relief Committee had gratefully accepted her offer of Eric's clothes. A plane would be calling to collect them that morning.

"I'll see to that," her aunt assured her. "What you need is fresh air and exercise. Take a walk to the village."

Hetty shook her head. "I promised Professor Clayton to let him have Eric's diaries as soon as possible. I'd better start sorting them out."

Her aunt frowned, and shook her head in disapproval. "Your health is more important than the diaries. But suit yourself."

The diaries were in Eric's study just as he had left them. He had dated and arranged them with great precision, almost as if he had known

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he would not come back. In addition to the diaries there were several graphs, pages of incomprehensible mathematical formulae, and photographs of men wearing what looked like divers' suits.

A shadow that momentarily dimmed the room drew her to the window. It was only the Famine Relief plane come for Eric's clothes.

She heard Aunt Hetty's voice and sounds of movement in the bedroom above. She listened as if it was Eric's body they were taking away. Presently the plane took off. Her aunt appeared in the study, looking very determinedly cheerful and matter-of-fact.

"Well, that's done," she said. "She was very grateful, especially for the leather shoes. They use those, you know, for making meat substitutes."

"So we've to eat Eric's old shoes!" Hetty said. "And this is the vaunted twenty-first century!"

"It's better than the last one," her aunt said. "At least we've no wars."

"Wars could be ended, but what's going to be the end of the famine? The scientists give us eight more years at the very most. Douglas will be twelve then."

"The scientists aren't always right," her aunt said. "Anyway, I'm going to take a taxi to Paris now, to see if I can buy a rabbit. Oh, by the way, what became of that photograph of you that used to be on the mantelpiece in Eric's dressing-room? I noticed just now it isn't there."

"He took it with him," Hetty said hoarsely. "He said I was going to be the first woman—"

She broke down. Wise from experience, her aunt patted her shoulder, said, "I must be off now, dear," and left the room.

Once alone Hetty quickly recovered. She busied herself making the diaries into neat parcels by years. Before she did up the most recent one, she looked at the last entry her husband had made.

"As far as is humanly possible the chances against us have been reduced to a minimum. The rest is in the hands of God," he had written.

The rest is in the hands of God! She looked out the window and saw a speck moving above the clouds. Knowing she was being ridiculous she opened the window and leaned out so that she could watch it as long as possible.

This 'sky-gazing' as her aunt termed it, was becoming a bad habit, like a drug that brought relief at first and then an eternity of pain. Resolutely, she turned away and tried to decide what she should do next.

There was a lecture on cooking she could view in the D.V. room. But she was sick of the grim famine discussions that had come to dominate people's lives. Despite what her aunt had said she still believed that even wars must have been preferable. Wars blazed and died. The famine was a black cloud, slowly, irresistibly creeping over the world.

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An album of photographs caught her eye. She opened it at random and saw Eric's father in old-fashioned uniform, with a peaked cap that almost hid his eyes. He'd been only a little older than Eric was now when he had been killed in the Last War.

She turned the page and saw a photograph of a girl wearing trousers and smoking a cigarette. Eric's grandmother at the age of eighteen! A twentieth century Miss who had lived before cosmic energy had been discovered, but who had had pretty nylon and cotton to wear, and real soap to wash with!

"People were happier then," Hetty decided. "Men killed each other in wars, but the world itself hadn't begun to die."

She thought of her children and *their* future. Her unhappiness and nagging anxiety sent her to the viewing-room where she could tune in on the special beam reserved for parents to the school dining-room. The midday meal was in progress and she could see her busily occupied progeny.

She thought Valerie, the eldest, looked sad, as if she missed her father. Elspeth, who was seven and very pretty, was chatting gaily; and Douglas, who sat amongst the infants, was sucking a spoon upside-down and glaring at the teacher.

Hetty had a certain distaste for spying on her children. She was grateful when the beam enlarged the day's menu which was chalked on a blackboard. Fishcakes, rice-pudding and stewed apples was what they were having. As was only right the children got priority for food.

She had started her own lunch of bean-toast and watercress sandwiches, when her aunt returned from Paris, hot and tired, but triumphant because she had secured a rabbit. Hetty inspected the emaciated little creature.

"How much were you obliged to give for that?" she asked.

"Fourteen thousand francs and a packet of tea. Do you think I was cheated?"

"No, I don't. You're a better shopper than I am."

"That's because I've had more experience. Anyway, you're a better shopper than Eric was. Do you remember the day he—?"

They talked lovingly about Eric for the remainder of the meal, and Hetty, with great self-control, restrained herself from looking at the sky. As a treat because she had been to Paris and bought a rabbit, she made her aunt a cup of bean-coffee with sugar. Then they switched on the news and were cheered to hear that thanks to cosmic stimulation of the soil the Canadian potato crop promised to be a record one.

"The scientists will beat the famine yet," her aunt said quietly.

In the afternoon Hetty went out to mow the lawn that had only been preserved as a lawn because the soil was too weak to grow anything except grass from cosmic-fertilized seed. It wasn't entirely waste, how-

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ever, since the clippings could be used for silage.

There was a radar-controlled atomic mower that would have done the job in half-an-hour. For the sake of exercise, however, and because Eric had once said it gave a closer cut, she used the little antiquated hand machine she had to push herself. The whirr of the blades was soothing and she loved the scent of the new-cut grass. She recalled with a pang that Eric had mowed the lawn by hand on the day before he went away, possibly to divert his thoughts.

She began to play a game. In her imagination she was Lawn-Mower Hetty. Lawn-Mower Hetty who mustn't stop because so much depended upon her. The whirring blades were motors, and the grass they flung up a shower of green meteors through which no living thing could pass. Once a bee took off with a furious buzzing directly before the wheels and floated through the meteors apparently unscathed.

"It's going very fast and there's plenty of room if there's nothing else!" she could imagine Eric saying.

The lawn was on a slope. Up the slope Lawn-Mower Hetty had to labor in a succession of short, fierce bursts, her feet boosting the ascent like rockets. When she turned and began to descend the pull of the rose tree at the bottom caught her and she hurtled downwards at twenty-five thousand miles an hour. Faster and ever faster until she saw the gravel path ahead and then her heels became great parachutes to break the shock. Around and then up again toward a goal she could never reach because the meteors were a shower of death, dividing her from victory.

The return of the children brought her back to earth. When they had been fed and Douglas, who was in one of his worst moods, had been forcibly put to bed, she returned to the mower.

But somehow the zest had gone out of the game. Even as a cutter of grass she knew herself to be a failure. She had let Eric down. He had expected so much of her and she had failed.

The evening was drawing in and something she dared not look at had appeared in the sky. It was a new moon shaped like the hooked finger of a witch beckoning men to an icy death in a dark void. They floated in the void like drowning kittens in a pail of water. They clawed each other and suffocated slowly, or they were engulfed in one flash of fire while the moon soared inviolate and serene above their puny struggles.

Tired and with blistered hands she took the mower back to its shed. When she returned into the house it seemed very silent. All the children were in bed now and her aunt was watching a play. She went into Eric's study, picked up a book at random and tried to compose herself to read.

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It was an old book concerned with the wars of the last century. It seemed meaningless to Hetty. The people it described had lived in a different age and had faced different problems. World Famine had not yet crept upon them. Only a handful of the wisest scientists had even glimpsed the grisly shadow of the wolf stalking mankind.

She was living when the wolf had begun taking its toll. It was three years now since the World Famine had started, and the wolf's shadow had encircled the globe and all nations were huddled together, their animosities forgotten, like animals trapped by a raging forest fire.

"We'll have to break out," the scientists said. But the question was, *how?*

Suddenly Hetty, who had been half dozing, realized that her aunt had come into the room. The older woman was very pale, and when she spoke her voice sounded strange.

"Hetty, are you asleep? They've switched off the television. The announcer said they were going over to Universal News and asked everyone to stand by for an important announcement."

Hetty felt her hands go wet and her heart start pounding. No, she wouldn't allow herself to hope. She forced herself to smile. "He's going to tell us that the Assam rice-crop has failed and we must all tighten our belts a little more."

"We ought to listen anyway."

"All right."

She switched on her wrist-radio. They sat in silence while the tiny dial glowed green. There were crackling noises and then, suddenly, a voice announced: "This is Universal News. For the next four hours this, and all other stations will bring you on the spot coverage of an event which may well be crucial to the future of mankind. *Space-ship Hetty,* commanded by Commander Eric Marcham, thirty-five days overdue and officially given up as lost, has landed on Space Station R. I. 7, after a successful trip to Mars. There were no casualties. The crew are all well and in high spirits."

"He's done it!" Hetty cried.

She began to weep and fumble for her handkerchief. The night was full of cheering. It was as if something that had been pent-up for centuries had suddenly been released and was pouring in a shining, golden torrent around the globe. But all she was really aware of was that Eric had come back safe and sound, and that upstairs Douglas had woken up and was bellowing like a young bull eager to give battle to the Universe.

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the advantages are tremendous

by . . . Curtis W. Casewit

It was a chemical plan for mass destruction, almost as dreadful as the Hydrogen Bomb. But its wily inventor had an ace up his sleeve.

CONTRARY TO the rule, Professor Theodor Lindemann had not been brought behind the Iron Curtain at gunpoint.

He went to what he called the *Barbaren* at his own accord and his chemical weapon went with him, simply because the barbarians had offered him a large sum of money for it. But after three months of his scientific surrender-the Professor was sick and tired of his hosts and desperately anxious to get back to Leonora, his wife, and to the land of his birth. He therefore began to ask for his return documents, softly, earnestly, as a great pharmacologist well might, his tallness, enormous forehead and academic looks adding a certain persuasiveness to his appeal.

To his astonishment, there came an afternoon when Captain Puitov, Sergei Puitov, of Chemical Warfare, announced that the Professor's return had been foreseen, and that the papers were already signed and sealed, in the Captain's own tunic, under the Captain's resplendent medals. To prove his point, Captain Puitov even unbuttoned a

If you were so unfortunate as to have missed Curtis W. Casewit's recent brilliant lead novelette in ARGOSY *or his original teleplay "Tiger," this briefer yarn—his newest—will enable you to discover at first hand just how terrifyingly timely a Casewit story can be. He pulls no punches, as you'll see, and doesn't pause for breath, until he scores a dramatic triumph heavily underscored with seething, tumultuous currents of dread.*

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pocket and his tiny pink hands emerged with an envelope.

"Your papers? Right in here," Puitov said as if someone were pinching his nostrils. "Right in this envelope. But *after* the experiment, understand?"

Then he turned his wide hips and narrow shoulders toward the Top Ten. These, Professor Lindemann knew, had come to witness the experiment on a live rhesus monkey. He also knew that none of the *Barbaren* had the faintest notion of chemical warfare or medicine, though they'd somehow been put in charge of the Department.

It was a travesty.

One of them was a Marshal, a man in a medal-bedecked uniform with a coarse face, who presently grinned so that the General, the Colonel and all others, down to the automatic-toting sergeant grinned also.

"Before I give you the papers," said Captain Puitov, "you will tell us about your gas."

"*Ja,* Captain Puitov."

"Well?"

"The advantages of *Tabun* gas—"

"*Nyet, nyet!* No. It's *Tabunsky* now—"

"The advantages of *Tabunsky* are—"

"Are tremendous!" Captain Puitov pushed himself in front of the scientist and addressed the Top Ten who were gathered in the front room of a farm house—a large, ugly room with sullied walls, a rusty stove and an empty coal bucket.

"Distinguished officers, *tovarishe,* comrades," Captain Puitov declaimed in his nasal voice. "I *personally* will describe Limpelmann's gas!"

Puitov waited until the Marshal, the Colonel, and the comrades had laughed about the "Limpelmann," and then went on pompously: "Number one—the tactical viewpoint. What does *Tabunsnky* do? It surprises! Now why should it surprise? Ah, *Tabunsnky* is colorless, odorless, non-corrosive. Number two—the medical viewpoint. Advantages again! *Tabunsky* has no latent period. You'll see that for yourselves this afternoon when I perform my experiment on the monkey. You'll observe the gas in action."

Captain Puitov's rimless glasses glittered and his tiny chin went up and down. "Please imagine, for a moment! As little as three drops into the pores of an Imperialist's skin—and what do we have? Agony! Unendurable agony. And death—quick death! Gas masks? Completely senseless. Antidotes? There are none. Injections of atropine or adrenaline, perhaps? Futile, ridiculously futile! Like a toothpowder against leukemia!"

As the Captain strutted through the room, Professor Lindemann could hear the envelope and his papers rustling. He was astonished that his superior had kept his promise. After the experiment he would

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be free to take a train out of the Curtain right into the arms of his wife who would cry, with a little gasp: *"mein Suesser!* My sweet one!" The thought made Professor Lindemann stare through the windows.

It was nasty weather outside, and the trees and hills were heavy with snow. But what if Puitov didn't provide the papers? The Professor discarded the idea, but it forced itself back into his mind. If Puitov should make difficulties, it would be too bad for Puitov.

Everything the Captain knew about *Tabunsky,* he knew first hand, of course. But there was one important thing the pompous little man did not even suspect. If Puitov stayed in character, that one small, missing piece of information might well break the Captain's pink neck.

For the time being, Puitov stayed in character. He elaborated on *his* experiments on albino rabbits and dwelt on *his* ideas on how to disperse the gas by means of aerosol clouds from innocent-looking planes, ostensibly sent out on a benevolent mission to kill insects. With an odious little smile, he added that the Imperialists were indeed no better than common lice, or beetles.

He went on to explain how *he,* Puitov, had scattered the labs over a wide area—Pathology II, North, Gas Physics, Colloid Chemistry, South, and Neurology, 1 km West—and how adroitly he had directed research in Organic and Inorganic Chemistry. He, the great Puitov in person.

He ended by stressing the fact that he had found that one hundred percent secrecy was absolutely essential for this afternoon's project. He even boasted about the loneliness of the house, a loneliness which had been achieved by simply sending its previous inhabitants on a Northeastern trip, by which, of course, he meant Siberia.

"And now, comrades, I will show you the laboratory," he announced. "It is behind this wall. You, too, Limpelmann! Come with me!"

The Professor followed his superior into the kitchen. Advancing to a table near the door, Captain Puitov removed a circular mirror from above a smaller wooden square. Directly beneath the square, there was a reversible switch, and as his comrades watched he quickly proceeded to turn the device, first to the left, then to the right.

Back in the main room, a motor hummed. There was a sudden click, a faint rattle, and as Puitov blared: "Comrades, watch the wall in front of you!" a massive section of tiling rolled smoothly upwards. A slot formed under the ceiling, and into it the wall vanished and also a part of the roof. The Professor knew the mystery.

Captain Puitov's eyes glowed with pride. "A complicated process," he exclaimed. "Especially to fasten the wall onto a metal sheet. But I overcame all the technical

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difficulties, and here is the laboratory in front of you!"

The Top Ten entered, their medals clinking against their chests.

"It is well concealed," Captain Puitov continued. "It is hidden like our thermo-nuclear labs behind the Urals, completely unsuspected by our enemies." He pointed to a table which was covered by a maze of instruments and test tubes. "Here I performed my final experiments," he boasted. But Lindemann knew that the equipment was new, freshly out of packing cases, and that the Professor had remembered to place it on the table solely to impress his official visitors.

"And here is the glass cage." Puitov strutted toward a huge contraption which looked like a coffin for a giant, and stroked its surface with his tiny hand. "Now I beg you to understand, comrades, that this is a most unusual kind of glass. It can neither be broken or melted by extremes of heat. It is even one hundred percent bullet proof. You see the small cot? The animal will lie on that—or to be more precise —on this rubber mat, with its wrists tightly chained to these hooks. Its feet will be cuffed down also, but not its entire body. Why, you may ask. Why shouldn't the entire monkey be chained down? Ah, he must have mobility, to survive the terrible convulsions!"

Puitov wrinkled his nose, so that the spectacles moved up and down. "These convulsions are unique, and therefore worth studying. Have you ever seen an epileptic? That is how the monkey will toss and twist himself about and tremble."

The Captain stared at his audience, eager for approval.

The Marshal nodded, and the others followed suit.

"Now here against the wall are the centrifugal pumps, and over there, the labyrinth of pipes. Here on the ground, you can observe the tanks. Both hold five liters of the liquid. Five liters is all we've fabricated so far. Still, it is enough to kill one division of our despicable enemy. *Tabunsky* streams swiftly through the network of pipes and gathers within another tank which you cannot see because it is hidden in the wall . . . Limpelmann!"

"*Ja,* Herr Captain."

There was a gentle murmur of amusement, which pleased Puitov.

"Everything in the laboratory," he said, "works by push-button! And I will let Limpelmann activate the buttons!"

The murmur turned into an outburst of hilarity. The *Barbaren* stood in one block, the Marshal and the General with their peasant faces well out in front, and the others on tiptoe behind.

"Now here is the panel which I designed," Puitov went on quickly. "These buttons correspond to the various phases of my experiment. Most important is the dispersion unit. Its purpose? The distribution of the liquid. Limpelmann! Activate button A!"

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The Professor's slender fingers moved.

A metal tube darted out of the wall like a suddenly aroused snake, and entered the glass cage through a narrow aperture. Unfolding over the cot the flexible metal piping seemed like a large shower nozzle.

The Chemical Warfare Council pressed closer.

"Down these steps we will take the monkey. He has not been drugged, so that we can do the experiment full justice. You see the steps, *tovarishe?* And the small corridor, along which the animal will walk? Good. Now if you will come a little closer, you can observe the trap door, through which he gets into the cage. Ingenious, is it not?"

He turned toward the Professor. "Button B!"

The trap door grated upwards. "Leave it open," warned Puitov. "Another minute and we will have the monkey. Meanwhile, a question, comrades Should we not be proud of all this? Does not my work please you?"

Go right ahead, thought the Professor bitterly. *Call it* your *work. Forget that you begged me for the idea. Forget how humble you were when you pleaded with me for information, so that you could conduct the experiment before the* Barbaren *and boast of your cleverness. You may boast now. You may think you know as much as I do about the outcome. But you don't. That is where you're mistaken. I still have one superiority over you.*

The door opened and two guards entered with the monkey. It was a small male rhesus with a pink posterior, a short tail and a ludicrously deadpan face. One guard had the animal on a chain and pulled him forward by the neck while the other nudged him from behind, using the barrel of his tommy-gun.

Captain Puitov followed them pridefully into the cage. The monkey kept attempting to bite but his struggles were of no avail and he was speedily fastened to the cot. The Professor watched his limited acrobatics with ill-concealed impatience until the guards went out. The small group was completely alone now. Even the driver that had brought the Marshal was in the city awaiting orders.

The Professor was taken to a blackboard and Puitov said: "Very well, Limpelmann! Write down your equations—"

The Professor put down the *Tabunsky* formula. He wrote slowly, conscientiously, thinking: *Let this Dummkopf show off to his heart's content. Let him brag, and use chicanery now. He will soon have a rude awakening.*

When the Professor had finished, Puitov cried in feigned outrage: "Illegible! Give *me* the chalk. I will write the equations, personally."

Captain Puitov elevated himself on his toes, erased the formula from the board, and re-wrote the same figures. Then he addressed the Top Ten, his small eyes sparkling be-

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hind thick glasses. "Can you read it now?"

After they had all nodded, he turned toward the tall Professor. "I've studied your notes. They're safe in our archives. You will now repeat them to—"

"Ja, Captain Puitov."

"For your toxicity figures. Which formula?" demanded Puitov.

"The Haber formula."

"Give it!"

"C x t equal to ct."

"Which means?"

"C is the concentration expressed in milligrams per m^3 or mm^3—"

"Nyet, nyet!" Captain Puitov shook his head. "Not m^3," he corrected. "But cubic meters! And cubic millimeters."

Professor Lindemann smiled, without contradicting his superior who had simply repeated the same formula, thus revealing the fact that he knew that m^3 meant cubic meters.

"Limpelmann is too slow for us," he said, scornfully. "I will continue, personally. That is the time of exposure in minutes, ct the lethal dose resulting." Captain Puitov now recited a dozen figures, molecular weight of *Tabunsky,* boiling point, volatility.

"And another thing!" He turned abruptly. "Do you hear this screaming and retching from the cage? Does it disturb you, comrades?" He strutted toward the panel, followed by the Professor. "Well, here is our silencer button. How does it work? How did we get a sudden absolute silence after Limpelmann pressed it for us? Asbestos layers, of course, lining the bottom of the cage. But it also cuts off the animal's air.

"So—we will start now! *I* will press the buttons. Dispersion first. You've seen how it telescoped out of the wall? It does so again. Watch closely. It fans out. As for the gas, three drops are enough. I mentioned that before."

The Captain waved a pink hand at his colleagues, then concentrated on his instruments. "However, we will give him twenty drops. And *I* personally will now turn the wheel. Watch the flowmeters. There, slowly. Twenty drops are gone."

At the same time the Professor heard a humming of pumps, and the clucking noise of the gas streaming through the pipes. Then the drops gathered under the dispersion unit. For a moment they hung suspended, collecting in glittering beads. Then they came down, reached the monkey's face, and ran over his body.

Puitov was pressed against the glass cage. "The light you just saw, comes out of the dispersion unit. It goes on automatically when the liquid is released. Come closer, comrades. Study the clinical drama which commences. I will explain the medical symptoms."

That is fine, thought the Professor. *Explain the medical symptoms. I taught them to you. Except one.*

Puitov paused until the bemedaled ten stared into the cage.

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"There now," he began in his nasal voice. "The animal opens his eyes. The cornea is sensitive to the light—a very interesting symptom. He cannot focus his eyes. He already has a peculiar pain behind the eyeballs. In a moment, we shall see pinpoint pupils, then inhibition of his optical nerves. The consequence? Total blindness.

"Ah, a pressure in his neck now. Observe the discharge from the nose, the trace of saliva on the lips. Observe it, comrades. Another few seconds and salivation will be quite profuse. The blood-pressure will sink to shock levels in a moment. *Tabunsky,* as you know, overstimulates the parasympathetic nerve endings, which, in turn, control the respiration. Notice his first breathing difficulties. The broncho-spasms are setting in. The monkey is now —if you will permit my inadequate comparison—like a fish out of water. He cannot inhale, though he tries frantically. Exhalation? That, too, is impossible."

The Captain's pink face was glued to the glass. He spoke without turning so that he would miss nothing. "Ah, at this stage, he becomes confused. His facial muscles are working as if he were about to go completely mad. He has swallowed the contaminated saliva. Do you not see? His bowels have lost control. At the same time, there is an almost unbearable distention of his urethra. The bladder, naturally—"

He turned to stare at his audience. They were watching the cage in tight-lipped horror. Satisfied, Captain Puitov went on: "Notice the discoloration of his lips. It is the direct result of his pulmonary difficulties. The nails will turn blue later. See there!" Puitov went on, his body with its large hips, and small shoulders, pressed against the rounded cage like the body of a woman.

"There! The climax! And so quickly! Here come the convulsions I spoke of. The animal literally writhes, twists itself into knots. Amazing, is it not? What causes the convulsions? A violent contraction of the muscle fibers. See his sweat glands laboring? He must have lost a minimum of one liter. We'll check on that in a moment. Here's the last symptom. It's unique. Watch!"

The Captain turned, his pink face gleaming with perspiration, his tunic soaked. "See it?" he cried, "his hair—erected! It virtually stands up!"

The Professor stood back against the panel, quietly watching the dead monkey. Outside, snow whipped against the house. In the room, they gloated.

Captain Puitov approached him. "A masterpiece!" he exclaimed. "A work of genius!" He looked toward the others. They were in a paroxysm of joy, sharing Puitov's perversity.

When they all nodded, Professor Lindemann said simply, and with a modesty that came easy to him. "I

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am glad, Captain Puitov. And I shall welcome my return papers now—"

"Your papers? *Papers?* But Limpelmann, a man of your caliber—how could I possibly release you today."

"You promised, Captain."

"Of course! Your papers are right here." Puitov pulled out the envelope as he spoke, nodding. "See? I have them. But certainly not today. A few more weeks with us and then—"

"*Ja,* Captain Puitov." Professor Lindemann bowed, realizing that he had no alternative but to use his plan. "I admired your knowledge," he went on with modesty again. "And I will let *you* therefore perform the autopsy."

The Captain could have asked for nothing more to his liking. Button E was pressed for decontamination, and a device quickly dried the *Tabunsky* inside the cage, sending a bubbling shower of chlorinated lime over floor and monkey. The Professor then brought the bag with his instruments from the corner—rubber-gloves, stethoscopes, and a half-dozen small, sharp knives. The trap door came open and Captain Puitov stayed in character.

"Marshal, General, *Tovarishe!*" he announced. "I personally will handle the post-mortem examination. Please watch!"

They all went inside the cage. Lindemann could have pressed Puitov's ridiculous buttons, but that would have been far too dangerous. He still had an hour to get to the train and his plan required only a few minutes. He therefore stationed himself cautiously near the trap door, and while the Top Ten leaned over the monkey's cadaver to watch Captain Puitov's prowess with the scalpel and thumb-forceps, Professor Lindemann listened to Puitov's explanations.

Puitov had meanwhile taken knives and rib-cutters out of the Professor's bag. After a while, his nasal voice stopped. There were fewer and fewer words. Then none at all.

The Professor stepped quickly forward, and took an alkali-soaked rag from his bag. The rag protected his nose and mouth as he went toward Puitov. He experienced no difficulty in extracting the papers out of his superior's tunic. Then he left the cage, alone. By the time he pressed button B that brought the trap door down, the convulsions had started inside the cage.

The Professor smiled. He had counted on Puitov's desire to perform the autopsy. Naturally, Puitov did not know that one had to wait considerable time until such an operation could be risked. The pompous Puitov was a chemist—and a bad one at that. He did not know that the monkey's temperature evaporated the gas, so that it became a highly noxious vapor when it left the lungs of the animal.

Professor Theodor Lindemann went to the panel, pressed the but-

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tons until *Tabunsky* flowed into the dispersion unit, and then dripped, and splashed, a shower of a thousand drops, ten thousand, one hundred and seventy-five thousand. Presently one tank was empty. Grimly, working against time, he emptied the other tank, pressed the button for silence, and the switch that brought the wall down.

Then, the Professor went to the back of the house, and managed to break into the archives, which he destroyed. Everything worked to his satisfaction. He got around the sentry—there was only one—and to the road, walking first swiftly up a hill, and then down.

It was a pity, he thought an hour and twenty minutes later, that he had never been paid for his services. But he could relax now, for he was sitting in a train that was carrying him to safety.

He fingered the documents and started to think of Leonora, his wife who would be waiting for him at the border. He dreamed of her until the train stopped, and the soldiers came to check his papers. Calmly, the envelope came out of his pocket. He watched the soldiers as they exchanged glances, then stared at him.

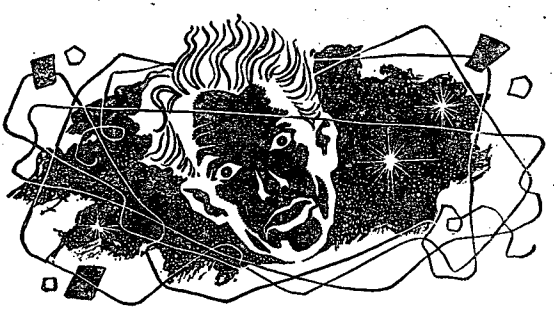
Finally they said, *"Nyet, nyet."* No, he couldn't get through.

He reached for the papers, all red stars, and black signatures, and read:

"In view of your scientific superiority, we have decided upon a transfer for you. Upon receipt of this order, you will report to a special laboratory in Moscow where, apart from teaching at our Academy of Sciences, you will perform a Tabunsky *experiment on one hundred humans—"*

Professor Lindemann shut his eyes.

Just then he heard Leonora his wife outside the train. As he had expected, she was crying: "Theo, Theo! *Mein Suesser,* my sweet one!" It was his turn to gasp, not hers, because the soldiers pushed him out of the compartment and dragged him away toward Moscow.



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a new world

by . . . Richard R. Smith

The Abstractions could dissolve steel and concrete with the power of thought alone. But human minds have a stubborn survival capacity.

THE FEATURELESS steel door whispered tonelessly in his mind, *Director, Concentration Department.*

The door opened and he stepped inside. He had expected a receptionist's office or at least a waiting room. Instead, he found himself standing in an amazingly spacious central office luxuriously furnished with teakwood chairs, oriental rugs, multidimensional paintings and floor-to-ceiling mirrors.

The famous Alice Barlow smiled at him from behind a small, ebony-black desk. She rose and seemed almost to glide across the floor toward him, her slender young body moving with incredible grace.

"Welcome to the Department, Mr. Jones," she said.

"Thank you," he replied.

She extended her hand and he shook it, briefly amazed at the warmth and softness of it. He wondered if she was an exceptional woman, or if he had been in Concentration School so long he'd forgotten what women were really like.

"Nervous on your first day of

If you've unwisely allowed yourself to believe that intelligence and biological life are inextricably linked in Space and Time a surprise awaits you here. For Richard R. Smith is prepared to convince you that an abstract design—a drawing, a painting or even a complex mathematical figure—can have a terrifying life of its own. All he asks is a reasonable suspension of disbelief, and an attentive ear as his daring soars.

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work here?" Miss Barlow inquired.

"Slightly."

She was neither beautiful or plain, he decided as he glanced at her face. Her nose was a trifle too large, and her lips just a little too full, marring the perfection of an otherwise beautiful face.

Miss Barlow studied his face intently as she spoke. "There isn't much to explain, Mr. Jones," she said. "You know what your duties will be. All you have to do is sit and concentrate. Your examinations indicate that you have quite exceptional gifts in that respect. I think you'll go far in the Department." She paused, then smiled as she added, "Of course, there is one important thing I should remind you of. Don't talk to the Abstractions! Be very careful about that."

They both laughed at the witticism.

"Good luck," she said.

They shook hands once more. The formality of the brief interview completed, he left immediately for his Station.

A half hour later another featureless steel door in another building closed soundlessly behind him, and he was alone with his thoughts. He glanced at the empty room, his eyes passing slowly over the slanting concrete walls, and domed ceiling. Pride came upon him as he looked at the single large chair in the metal dais. *My job,* he thought.

He sat in the comfortable chair and the dais began to turn slowly. As the chair revolved, he stared at the floor and thought—*Concrete . . . concrete . . .*

While he concentrated, a far corner of his mind wandered. He found himself speculating as to what his precise position in life would have been if his ancestors had conquered space or Henderson had failed to find a way to enter another dimension decades ago. Where would he be now if the teeming billions of Earth hadn't populated the new dimension?

Abruptly, he discarded the questions as unanswerable and foolish.

Concrete . . . concrete . . . His teeth clenched slightly as he brought all of his thoughts to bear on the floor's rough surface.

"Hello!"

The voice roared in his mind and shook him physically. Never before had he met anyone with such a violent telepathic contact faculty. Purely from automatic reflexes, he glanced about the empty room as if expecting to see the intruder.

"Go away. I'm working. I have to concentrate!" *Concrete . . . concrete . . .* His invisible, powerfully directed thoughts flowed toward the floor.

"What are you doing?" the stranger inquired.

"I'm concentrating on the floor. Will you please break contact. Interruptions can be dangerous."

"Precisely why are you thinking about the floor?" the mental voice asked.

It must be a child, Jones decided. Or an idiot totally unfamiliar with

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the proprieties. He ignored the question.

"Will you please explain?" the voice persisted.

Sweat trickled down his face. Nervously, he pushed a button on the chair arm, and lifted a glass of water from the depositor. He drank quickly, his uneasiness sharply increasing. *What a ghastly thing to happen on my first day!* he thought wildly.

For two hours, he ignored the telepathic voice. For two hours, it repeated monotonously, "Will you please explain?" At the end of that nerve-wracking period, it had asked the same question at least five hundred times.

Well, why not? It shouldn't take long to explain, and he could think of no other way of silencing the voice.

"I'm concentrating on the floor to keep it there," he said.

"To keep it *there?*"

"Yes, If I don't think about it, it will dissolve."

"But why?" the voice demanded.

Jones' lips tightened impatiently. "Don't you understand? The Abstractions will dissolve it with their thoughts."

"Why should they do that?"

"Because they don't want *us* in their dimension."

"Why?"

He realized suddenly that he could hardly hope to explain without going back and telling the entire story from its beginning to the present moment.

He altered his mind in such a way that a certain portion of it automatically and unconsciously concentrated on the concrete floor. Then, with the remaining conscious portion, he explained to the inquiring stranger with telepathic illustrations.

He painted a grim and starkly tragic mental picture of an overpopulated Earth, with its billions of people crowded together and growing constantly more crowded with every passing day. He dwelt on the invisible, fatal radiomagnetic rays in outer space that would have made space-flight and colonization of other planets suicidal.

A man named Henderson had discovered a way to enter another dimension . . . the solution to the population-space problem. Millions had entered the alien dimension. The extra-dimension was empty and they had been compelled to construct a steel and concrete foundation to build their homes upon.

The native inhabitants of the dimension were not physical—no one could see or hear them. They talked to men's minds and drove them insane. Somehow, they dissolved sections of mankind's concrete and steel foundation in the new dimension and men were trapped and probably killed inside the disappearing structures. At any rate, they were never heard from again.

"Do you understand?" he asked, when he had withdrawn the last mental projection. "A group of us

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are distributed over the Foundation. So long as we concentrate on the Foundation, it cannot be dissolved by the Abstractions and the people living in the Dimension will be safe."

"What are *Abstractions?*"

"The natives of this dimension!" Jones exclaimed impatiently.

The invisible entity was silent.

Jones regained conscious control of the portion of his mind that had automatically concentrated on the floor, stared at the concrete and thought distinctly—*Concrete.*

Anxiously, he glanced at the Indicator on one arm of the chair. No, the needle had not wavered.

"Who are you?" he asked the now silent stranger.

"An Abstraction."

HOURS LATER, a fellow worker arrived to relieve him, and without a word ascended the dais and took his place in the slowly revolving chair.

Jones left the Station and wandered aimlessly down the street. Thinking about concrete for hours at a time was unnerving and now that his mind was free of the task, he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from him.

He glanced at the low, scattered buildings and wondered how many people lived in just that one square mile Area. Two thousand? It was a frightening responsibility. His thoughts protected the very material they walked on from the horrifying creatures of an alien dimension.

Sometimes he wondered how a Concentrator's thoughts *could* protect the Foundation. Did they act as an impenetrable shield? Or merely as a tenuous mental safeguard, warning away intruders? He didn't know. Even in Concentration School, the instructors hadn't informed them exactly *how* the protection worked. They had stated only that thought-concentration *did* work.

He glanced up uneasily at the artificial sky thousands of feet above him. Did the Concentration Department have men up there too, to prevent the Abstractions from dissolving the Ceiling barrier? Or could the aliens only attack from *beneath* the Foundation?

A husky uniformed man blocked his path. "I guess I'd better have a look at your identification papers," he said.

Jones handed the policeman his wallet, and for the first time heard the dull hum of machinery that had passed unnoticed before. He looked beyond the policeman's shoulder and saw—the Edge.

Fascinated, he stared at the huge energy converters. The Dimension was filled with raw energy and converters worked continuously at the Foundation's Edge, changing energy into oxygen, concrete, steel and other substances. He knew of the machines but had never seen them before.

The policeman returned the wallet. "Your papers are in order. But

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don't you know you're not allowed this close to the Edge?"

"I'm sorry, officer. I was preoccupied and didn't notice where I—" He faltered abruptly, realizing that he had committed his second law-violation of the day. He had not only conversed with an Abstraction, he had committed the almost equally serious offence of going too close to the Edge. Was he a subconsciously-motivated criminal?

"You were day-dreaming, eh?" The policeman laughed. "What do you think that red line is for?"

He pointed a stubby finger. Jones glanced behind him, and saw the bright red line several blocks away. It gleamed in the sunlight.

"To warn people not to—"

The policeman waved his hand. "Okay. Notice it next time."

Jones turned and almost ran away from the Edge.

AFTER THE fourth drink, his nerves quieted and he could think rationally. It had been a rough day—his first experience with a responsible job and an unlawful conversation with an Abstraction. He shuddered inwardly when he realized what would happen to him if anyone discovered he had talked with an Abstraction.

He sipped his drink and stared through the tavern's glass wall at the artificial sunset, rejoicing at the sight of widely dispersed buildings, green lawns and wide streets. It gave him a lift to see so much *space* where people were not crowded.

He remembered his childhood on Earth, with its crowded apartments, schools and playgrounds. He remembered especially the swimming pools where there had been no room to swim—only barely enough space in which to stand erect and allow one's self to be pushed, first one way and then another, by a horde of half-naked bodies. Hundreds of people had eaten in the "Dining Rooms" and the noise had been almost unbearable even to those who had known no other way of life. He recalled the lack of privacy, the endless, millions of inquisitive eyes in strange, hostile faces that had seemed to be everywhere.

But here, in the Dimension, there was unlimited space. The Dimension had no boundaries. It stretched into infinity in every direction and mankind's protective shell of steel and concrete could expand indefinitely.

There was no limiting factor.

He wondered what the Abstraction he had talked to looked like. But that was an absurd thought. Abbies didn't look like *anything*. They weren't physical. They were totally alien.

He swung the bar stool around and glanced at the customers in the dimly lit booths, searching for a familiar face. He wanted to talk to someone, anyone.

He straightened in sudden relief as he noticed a familiar face.

A few seconds later, Alice Barlow glanced up at the man who stood beside her table.

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"Do you mind if I sit with you?" he asked.

"Please do, Mr. Jones."

He ordered drinks and emboldened by the warmth and confidence-inspiring afterglow of his four previous drinks said, "Call me Harvey."

She smiled graciously. "All right. And you may call me Alice."

The elimination of formal names pleased him. But he realized that tomorrow, when he was sober, he would regret this familiarity with his superior.

While he sipped his drink and studied her, he considered dispassionately the insurmountable difference in social standing between them. In her office, she had worn an ordinary women's business suit and had been without makeup. Now she wore a filmy blue dress that accentuated her slender grace and with only a small amount of makeup her face seemed strangely like that of a beautiful angel with moist red lips. He kept looking at her.

"This is only your third day in the Dimension, isn't it?" she inquired.

"Yes."

"How do you like it?"

"I like it very much. It's a lot less crowded than Earth." He laughed nervously as if he had violated an unspoken rule by mentioning the deplorable population problem on Earth. "So far, I don't know many people here. In fact, I'm totally unfamiliar with the local customs. But, I'll make friends as the weeks go by and sooner or later, I won't feel like a stranger at all."

"I'm sure you won't."

They talked several minutes about trivialities and at the right time, when it fitted neatly into the conversation, he inquired, "What are the Abbies like, Alice?"

She grimaced. "Like nothing on Earth. They're completely alien—not physical at all."

"Are they mental entities?"

"Not exactly. They're composed of an alien energy. Maybe that's the best way to think of them."

"Why is everyone forbidden to converse with them? Are they *that* dangerous?"

She paused, her cool grey eyes searching his face. "No, they're not exactly dangerous anymore. We have a perfect defense—the Concentration Department. So long as the CD functions, they can't damage our Foundation. The only danger is that Abstractions might contact individuals and convert them."

"*Convert* them?" His jaw sagged at the word. "Convert them to what?"

Alice drained her glass and signaled for another. "Their own way of life. You see, it's happened before. Abbies have telepathed to humans and converted them to the Abstraction life-form."

Jones could almost feel his mind grapple with the concept.

"But why would any man in his right mind allow himself to be converted into an . . . *Abstraction?*"

"It would mean a new and differ-

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ent life," she informed him. "A release from all psychological and physical problems. Some people would jump at a chance to have the excitement of an entirely alien way of life. Occasionally, someone *is* converted. Almost always, we locate the person before the change is completed and . . ."

She did not finish the sentence, but moved her hands expressively. The gesture seemed to imply the words *eliminate them.* "When people are converted, there isn't much loss. The Abbies only contact the *weakest* minds."

He decided he would have to stop asking questions before she became suspicious. Perhaps one more: "What happens to a human when he's converted to the Abstraction life-form?"

His companion smiled queerly. "The Abbies convert his entire body into their form of energy and transmit him to their—" she hesitated, then said quickly—"dimension."

Concrete . . . concrete . . .

It was hard to concentrate on his job. His mind kept wandering to the Abstraction he had met the previous day.

"Hello." There! Somehow, he had *known* the Abbie would communicate with him again.

"Hello," Jones replied, noticing that the alien's mental voice was now more attuned to his own telepathy plane.

He waited for the alien to ply him with questions as it had done the previous day and grew irritated when it remained silent.

"If you're an Abstraction," he asked, "why did you ask all those questions yesterday? Didn't you *know?*"

"All of my race does not know about humans. As for myself, I had just returned from a distant part of our dimension where there is no knowledge of your people."

"What's your name?" Jones asked.

"You would not understand it. It cannot be translated into your language."

"Hmmm. I'll call you AB. AB for Abstraction. Is that all right?"

He detected laughter in the alien's mental reply, "AB is satisfactory."

"What does your dimension look like?" Jones asked the alien.

"Do you want to see it?"

He glanced apprehensively at the dial on the chair arm. The instrument was designed to indicate the composition of the Foundation's mass. If he neglected his duty and Abbies attacked the concrete, dissolving it with their thoughts, the dial's needle would move. A similar needle in CD Headquarters would move too—and he would lose his job.

"I'd like to but I can't leave my job. I have to stay here and concentrate on every—"

"Do not worry," the Abstraction interrupted. "I will concentrate for you while you are away."

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Abruptly, Jones was in the alien dimension.

When a child, he had looked up at the stars and sensed the vastness of the universe. It had not prepared him for this. With his mind, he saw that the alien dimension stretched into eternity in every direction. And yet it wasn't space that reached towards infinity. It was the strange substance of an even stranger dimension. There were no solid objects. Energy flowed and swirled across the vastness with the frantic movement of an endless angry sea and struck islands of static energy with the gentleness of a soft breeze.

The land was filled with things that grew. Energy fed their roots and throbbed through multitudinous branches of warped space. The fruit of the growing things was composed of vibrations more harmonic than man's most beautiful music and colors more exciting than the most imaginative kaleidoscopes.

It was an alien terrain without definite sizes. Things were not *large* or *small*. Their size depended on the viewing entity's perspective. Weird mountain-like formations and luxuriant growths blended with an incredible smoothness.

Living things danced, cavorted and ran across the cosmic land, their movement more exotic and complex than any dance he had ever seen, their voices more harmonic than great orchestras, their bodies more intricate than that of a thousand divergently-evolved Earth creatures.

He lost all sense of time. Somehow, it seemed as if centuries had passed before the alien inquired, "Would you like to become one of us?"

"Yes!"

The alien extended a slender tentacle of radiant force to a myriad brilliant energy-growths that seemed miles in the distance. Then it quickly withdrew the extension and held a glittering, pulsating object before Jones.

"Here is the Seed," the alien informed him. "I will implant it in your mind. You must remain in your dimension until the Seed takes root. In twelve hours, the Seed will convert you."

The operation was swift, painless.

Jones awoke in the chair in his Station. He whirled to face the mass-indicator dial. No. It hadn't moved.

When his relief came, he went directly to a bar, selected a darkened booth and ordered a double rye collins. His hand trembled when he lifted the glass to his lips.

As he drank, he occasionally glanced at his watch. *In twelve hours,* the Abstraction had informed him. He had regained consciousness in the Station at one o'clock. It was now six-fifteen. Five hours and fifteen minutes of the required period had passed. The change would be completed at one o'clock in the morning. At one o'clock in the morning, he would be an Abstraction!

Already, he could sense the invisible, intangible Seed in his mind.

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As it *grew,* soft, tingling tendrils reached out along the neural patterns of his brain and his mind was changing. Changing into what? Although he had seen the alien form of life, had admired it and wanted to join them, he did not know what to expect.

A man and woman walked by his table, sat in a booth across the narrow aisle.

He paid no attention to their conversation until he overheard the words "Abbie lover."

Then, he ignored the other multitude sounds of the room and heard the bald-headed man say, "I don't know why anyone would want to be an Abbie. I think it's revolting!"

The blonde-haired woman leaned forward confidingly. "You know that Helene Summers? She said—" A sudden flurry of noise from another section of the room drowned the sentence.

Jones sipped his drink and tried to keep his eyes from wandering in their direction while he listened intently.

From the corner of an eye, he saw the bald-headed man pause to gulp a glass of beer. "Bill told me," he informed his woman companion. "He said they *knew* there was an Abbie lover around here somewhere. He said they have machines that detect them and track them down. I pity that guy when they catch him!"

"He deserves it," the woman stated bitterly. "Anyone who would want to join a pack of aliens who killed thousands of us when we first came here deserves what he'll get. And what's the matter with Abbie lovers anyway? Isn't the human race—their own race—good enough for them?"

Jones shivered as if the room had suddenly become cold. He had known of the general hatred for anyone who associated with Abstractions. It was natural. People feared and therefore hated unknown quantities. He hadn't known the police or CD could detect an "Abbie lover" with *machines.*

Had he made a mistake? When he saw the Abstractions' wonderful dimension, their magnificent form of life, he had been unable to refuse the alien's offer, *Would you like to become one of us?*

He had been overcome with the kaleidoscopic beauty, the harmonic vibrations, the wondrous sights and had answered purely from an emotional viewpoint, *Yes.*

But now, in the cold world of reality where facts were as hard and definite as the table before him, he knew it had been a wrong decision. A wrong decision because Alice had hinted that almost all Abstraction converts were located and killed before the change took place. She had only hinted but it had been as obvious as if she had shouted, "We kill all Abbie converts!"

He finished his drink and wandered about the streets for hours. Several times he tried to contact the Abstractions telepathically but was unable to do so.

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He was alone. Deserted by the aliens who had invited him to join them. Deserted? How could he be sure of that? The universe didn't revolve around him. For all he knew, the Abstractions might be performing necessary duties that required all their attention. They might be equivalently *sleeping*. And the most logical possibility of all: now that they had planted the Seed and it was only a matter of hours before he joined them, perhaps they were no longer interested in him as a human. Perhaps they had somehow blocked their minds against his telepathy while they awaited his arrival.

His head spun with the totally alien concepts until he thought he would go mad.

The Seed in his mind grew constantly. At first, he had sensed it only in his brain but now, he felt alien energy particles move down his throat toward his chest.

The sight of a squad car filled with stern-faced policemen reminded him. He should take some sort of evasive action. He had broken the law. They would try to find him. He saw no need to surrender. His own opinion was that it hurt no one if a man or woman decided to become an Abstraction.

In one of the larger automatic department stores, he bought a pair of glasses, false eyebrows, a blond wig and various other items of disguise.

After disguising himself as effectively as possible, he rented a small apartment near his home with the theory that the police or CD authorities would take it for granted that he would leave his immediate neighborhood.

Alone in the shabby apartment, he reclined on the bed and waited. The hours dragged by with tormenting slowness. At twelve-thirty, with only half an hour remaining before the conversion would be completed, the door to his room opened.

Alice Barlow walked into the room and smiled pleasantly as if she was performing a social visit.

"So you found the Abbie lover?" Jones said.

Her grey eyes studied the sweating man on the rumpled bed, a strange expression on her face. "Yes, we found the Abbie lover."

"How?"

She shrugged her shoulders negligently. "Machines. Does it really matter?"

"No." He closed his eyes. The Seed had taken root in every cell of his body and his flesh tingled warmly as strange, invisible roots altered his flesh in some incomprehensible way.

He wanted to rise and make one last struggle for his life but realized the Seed had weakened his muscles grievously.

"Are you going to execute me yourself?" he asked, wondering if the elimination had to remain so vitally cloaked in secrecy that only the top member of the CD could perform the duty.

"Before I answer that question,"

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she replied, "let me explain something. First, the general public has several misconceptions. The greatest of these is that the Abstractions are constantly attacking our Foundation in their Dimension and that the CD is necessary to defend the Foundation. Both conceptions are carefully told lies."

"The Abstractions aren't attacking our Foundation?" Jones repeated incredulously. "They aren't our enemies?"

"No. Years ago, we communicated with them and they agreed not to attack our Foundation. Now, the human race and the Abstractions are on very friendly terms."

Unable to believe his ears, Jones stared at the woman and wondered if he had gone mad. "Then why does the CD—?"

"Why does the CD still function as if the Abbies were our enemies? Why does the CD allow hundreds of men to sit in little Stations and concentrate uselessly on a mass of concrete? To answer those questions, another misconception has to be eliminated. Remember, I told you yesterday that the Abbies only contacted the *weakest* minds of our race?"

"You mean—?" He hesitated when he happened to glance at his limp right arm and noticed the hand was *transparent*. Through the translucent flesh, he saw the outline of bones and veins as if someone had focused an X-ray machine on his body.

"That was another lie the general public believes. The Abbies do not contact only the weakest minds. They contact only the *strongest* minds. Only the strongest human mentalities are able to communicate with them at all. And we want members of our race to communicate with Abstractions. That is why the CD sends men and women to the Stations where they have absolute solitude and can concentrate freely."

"You *want* people to communicate with the Abbies?" he repeated unbelievingly. As he watched her, something happened to his eyes. The room seemed to darken and her body became only a shadowy blur against the darker inkiness.

"Exactly. The Abstractions' dimension is like a new world. We want to send human *explorers* into the new land. Some who have first-hand knowledge of the existing situation claim the alien existence is a better way of life than ours. Others say it is only *different* and completely alien. We want to send men into this different life-form and evaluate it."

"But why is all this kept secret?" Jones queried. "Why not tell everyone the truth?" He could not see her now as he spoke for his voice had become a faraway hollow sound in the impenetrable darkness.

She laughed at the question. "*Everyone?* All the billions on Earth? If we told the truth, hundreds of thousands of men and women would want to enter the Abstractions' dimension. The result

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would be a mass stampede, a chaos. No. We are careful to send only the best of our race into their dimension. For the time being, at least."

Her words carried assurance.

He did not hear the last of the explanation. The Seed had sent swirling tendrils into every cell of his body. The cells had altered and formed something that did not exist in a physical world but only in an alien dimension.

When Alice Barlow glanced at the bed again, it was empty.

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the good husband

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

Ellen's husband was so quiet and self-effacing she could almost picture him apologizing for the inscription on his own tombstone.

WHEN ELLEN had been twenty, even twenty-five, she would never have considered John as a matrimonial prospect. He would have been too dull, too stuffy, and—for ten years was a great span of time then—too old. Now that she was thirty-three, forty-three didn't seem old at all, and John was, as far as she could determine, dependable and steady.

So she agreed to marry him. With a romantic impetuousness that she had not thought him capable of, he had insisted upon an elopement—not that there was anyone to care whether or not they lived in "sin." They were married one fall evening in a small town where marriages could be arranged hastily, and ever since then—six months it had been—they had been living in John's little Greenwich Village apartment.

Once she had wondered whether she ever could grow fond of him. Now, looking at him as he sat reading near the fire, his bald spot shining, his rimless spectacles flickering with reflected flame, she wondered how she could ever do without him.

It is commonly assumed that an alert and discerning editor will snap up a manuscript from a very talented writer the instant it is presented. Unhappily the assumption is unwarranted, for few indeed are the writers who can be depended upon to maintain a uniform level of excellence with every story submitted. But we're becoming convinced that Evelyn Smith is one of the rare and gratifying exceptions, in her chosen realm of science-fantasy resplendent.

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Affectionately she got up and rearranged the muffler he wore indoors and out; he was always cold.

John looked up at her and smiled. His teeth were excellent, a feature she liked to dwell upon, because otherwise he was such a commonplace little man.

"You've been coming home later and later every evening," she remarked in a tone which she tried to keep from being querulous, rather bright and interested as if she wanted to know everything he did. Not that she knew anything—really. He never told her what his business was and she was afraid to press him, afraid of being thought a nagging wife, afraid of stretching the tenuous substance of her dearly-won marriage.

But his coming home later and later had been hard on her, especially when he worked Saturdays and Sundays too. She had come to rely upon his company so much.

He sighed. "As I told you, dear, a lot of people are beginning to take their vacations, so I have to stay later to do their work."

She returned to her book, trying to give the appearance of satisfaction. But she was not satisfied. Poor John! Everybody pushed their work off on him—he was such a meek little fellow. Yet there was an undercurrent of strength in him too. She never could get him to answer her questions. Should she try again?

No. He was such a good husband. He never went out evenings by himself, although he often went for a walk late at night. Soon after their marriage, she had been startled to awaken, and find the bed empty. When he came back, however, he explained to her that he was subject to claustrophobia and sometimes had to get up and go out for air. Since he always did look much the better for his outings, she never complained.

Her friends, when they dropped in for bridge or a quiet evening, were almost openly contemptuous of John. Still, she would far rather have had him than Madge's handsome Bill, who chased after women, and had even been known to try to kiss Ellen herself in the kitchen . . . or Peter, Lillian's husband, who drank.

Moreover, John had his family tree. "Our branch of the Carruthers family," he would inform guests in his dry, precise way, "has been in New York ever since the British took it from the Dutch. Some of my ancestors are buried out there."

And he would gesture toward the window that looked out on the graveyard. Behind the old brownstone was a forgotten little old cemetery. At first Ellen had thought the outlook macabre, but she soon grew used to it. Moreover, the apartment was comfortable and furnished with handsome old pieces that gave John's claims for his family a solid foundation.

Her guests would smile when he gave his little talks; yet she resented neither their merriment nor his pompousness. He made her feel as

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if she belonged not only to him but to a whole tradition. Wanting to belong, to be part of something had been one of the major obsessions in her life.

And his prosiness was less objectionable than Madge's detailed narratives of her bouts with the doctor. Madge had a tendency to hypochondria. Recently she had added anemia to her ailments and Lillian, always the copycat, had likewise professed a drop in her blood count.

When John would go out to the kitchen for more ice, Madge would ask, slanting her eyes, "But just what does John do for a living, Ellen?" and Ellen would have to admit she had no idea.

Then Lillian would say, giggling and fingering one of the dog collars both she and Lillian had begun to affect, "Maybe he's a bookie."

And everyone would laugh, because the idea of John's being anything outside the law was so absurd.

But this night, brooding over her book, Ellen found her curiosity irrepressible. During fall and winter John had been a model husband. Now that spring was here, he was coming home later and later. "In the spring, a young man's fancy..." And in the spring all men thought they were young. Could there be another woman?

And, after all, what did John do during the day that he was so reluctant to disclose? Didn't he know that she wouldn't mind even if he were a—a butcher?

When he got up very early the next morning, she got up too. She dressed quickly and quietly behind the closet door while he was putting on his rubbers and wrapping his muffler around his meagre throat and tucking his umbrella under his arm.

On rubber-soled feet she crept downstairs behind him. He didn't go out into the street at all. He went into the narrow side alley and, with a big wrought iron key from his pocket, opened the gate leading into the graveyard. There he went to a gravestone behind the big tree that concealed most of the cemetery from the overlooking windows and disappeared into the grave.

Not a minute too soon either, for dawn broke immediately afterward. There, in the watery light, was his umbrella leaning against the stone. Evidently he'd forgotten to take it in with him. She had thought he was getting a little absent-minded recently.

The inscription on the tomb said: "Sacred to the Memory of John Gaylord Carruthers, 1720-1763." He hadn't been lying about his family.

The thing to do, she knew, was to dig him up and plunge a stake through his heart. But she would find life lonely without John. Anyhow, now she knew he wasn't carrying on with another woman.

As she tenderly carried his umbrella upstairs, she thought of Madge's and Lillian's anemia—their dog collars—and laughed.

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escape mechanism

by . . . Arthur Sellings

The little man who wasn't there could have taken lessons from Dr. Jessup's most amazing patient. For Saunders was there—and how!

THE DISTINGUISHED Dr. Jessup riffled impatiently through the case history, then smacked it back on his desk with a *"Pah!"* of annoyance.

Why was that fool Nyren always sending him cases like this? Did he think the Jessup Foundation had nothing better to do? He scanned the note pinned to the history:

I think this case has some interesting aspects which might be of use for your book. By the way, how's it coming? . .

The hypocritical impertinence of it! So that was the idea. That was why, ever since their first meeting at the reception for Neurath, the Viennese analyst, he hadn't been able to get the fellow out of his hair. He was trying to worm his way on to the acknowledgments page of the great work, DEEPER ANALYSIS by Jessup. What did he expect? *"I must thank my learned colleague, Dr. Nyren, for his invaluable assistance?"* What outrageous effrontery.

It wasn't as if the cases he planted on him were of the slightest complexity or interest. There had

Here we have the kind of merriment that makes for goodfellowship wherever fantasy lovers congregate, with flagons of nut-brown ale, to hearken to green-haired maidens thrumming zithers all day long. You won't quickly forget the tragicomic woes of henpecked little Mr. Saunders nor the strange and really terrifying avenue of escape through which he passes to crown Arthur Sellings a royal princeling of science fantasy at its most engaging.

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been, for instance, that nymphomaniacal and very persistent burlesque dancer. He winced at the memory of the odor of cheap perfume which had hung around the consulting room for days. And that elderly professor with the persecution complex who had been convinced that he, Dr. Jessup, was the head of an investigating committee. And—

He broke off his train of thought with a snap. He'd be developing a persecution complex himself if he went on in this fashion.

But the case which lay before him now was the limit. *Henry Saunders, Age 32, Married, No Children, History:*— Why, it was the simplest and most obvious case of paranoia. He would have to write Nyren a short and most unprofessional note.

And to cap it all, the case was already five minutes late.

A gleam came into his eye. He would put the delay to profitable use by composing a devastating note, which Nyren could not possibly misunderstand. The words must be carefully chosen. It must be brief, meaningful, and—*final.* He reached for his pen.

He was beginning to turn over some appropriate and expressive adjectives in his mind when the desk intercom buzzed.

"Mr. Saunders, doctor," came the crisp voice of Miss Coad, his secretary.

"Send him in," said the head of the Jessup Foundation grimly.

The door opened and Henry Saunders entered, rather tentatively. He was large and plump and carried about him an air of cheerfully-endured discomfort.

"Good morning, sir," he said in a voice that seemed to apologize for his being there at all.

"It is eleven thirty-six, and thirty seconds," said Dr. Jessup. "Good morning. Take a seat. *No,* not there. Here, at my desk. Now, let me see. Your appointment was for eleven-thirty precisely. In other words, Mr. Saunders, for six and a half minutes the whole intricate mechanism of the Jessup Foundation has been waiting upon your arrival—completely *immobilized.* For six and a half minutes the monster of man's mental distress has been grinding on like a Moloch of destruction, while the Jessup Foundation has had to stand by, helpless to check its ravaging."

"My wife, sir," said Henry, squirming. "I'm very sorry, but really—"

"*Your wife!*" expostulated the great analyst. But the other's face bore such a look of pained sincerity, such a look of hopelessly frustrated goodwill, that he could not help changing the exclamation to a sympathetic question. "Your wife?"

"Yes," said Henry eagerly. "That's all the trouble. That's why I'm late, and I'm sure that's why I'm here anyway. I always have to tell my wife where I'm going, and I couldn't very well tell her I was coming here because she doesn't

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believe there's anything wrong with me at all, and I know there *is* something wrong with me, *very* wrong, and—"

"All right, *all right,*" said Dr. Jessup, raising one hand and making a note with the other. "Your wife doesn't understand. But we understand your kind of trouble here. I'm sure we'll soon have you right."

"You mean you have other people coming here with the same kind of thing I'm suffering from?"

"Hundreds, my dear fellow."

"I've never seen anyone with the same kind of trouble I've got," said Henry dubiously.

"But then," said the doctor urbanely, "your complaint is not one to be *seen,* is it?"

"But—well no, I suppose you're right. You mean, like you can see a hole and yet you can't?"

The doctor looked at his patient quizzically for a moment. "Well, something like that. Now, Mr. Saunders, tell me your story briefly."

"Well, doctor, the first time it happened was three weeks ago. My wife is a little woman, I must impress that upon you. In fact—"

"Mr. Saunders, let me hear *your* case," interrupted Dr. Jessup. "I am concerned with *your* mind, not your wife's physique."

"I'm sorry," said Henry hastily, "but that's at the root of it all. I stand head and shoulders above my wife. Now, if I was one of those little men with a straggly mustache, like in those 'life with father' pictures, and she was a huge woman, it would be different, wouldn't it? More natural. But when you get a little woman with a tongue as sharp as a woodpecker's beak and—"

The great Dr. Jessup was becoming increasingly perturbed at the failure of his renowned professional manner to contain his patient's apologetic lamentations. But on the other hand, he thought, regarding the entire matter with the objectivity he prided himself on, perhaps he was being a trifle unjust. Perhaps he was transferring some of his impatience with Nyren to the case which the fool had sent him.

"Mr. Saunders, *please.* Let us have brevity. The term you seek is *nagging,* I believe. Your wife nags you. Discounting the fact that every wife nags her husband in greater or less degree, I recognize that in your case it may have some bearing on your trouble. *Nagging wife.* See, I have written it down.

"Now I want you to tell me what has happened to you. But I also want you to keep to the point, Mr. Saunders. Afterwards, I shall encourage you to talk to me freely, as a necessary preliminary to your cure. But first of all the foundations, the map of the country, so to speak. Go on."

Henry beamed gratefully. "You make it sound so straightforward, doctor." Then his face reassumed its previous tragicomic aspect and he sighed. "Well, we were going to buy a suit. Perhaps it would be

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more correct to say, my wife was taking me to buy me a suit. That's the way it is. I like tweedy clothes, you see, and my wife thinks I only like tweedy clothes so I can make an impression on women. And really, I don't want to do that at all. I *love* my wife. Or I *did*. I still would—if only she could stop being suspicious of me."

He suddenly caught the look in Dr. Jessup's eye. "All right, I'm coming to the point now. Well, we got me a suit—if you can call it that. It was dark gray, with bright black stripes. We were walking away from the store when I saw a necktie I liked in another window. It was an orange-colored tie that I thought was just the thing to liven up that terrible suit—if anything could.

"I suppose I must have craned my neck a little to look at this necktie. And just then a blonde passed. At least, my wife said a blonde passed. I didn't see any blonde. I just turned to look at the tie. And that started it.

"My wife stopped dead in her tracks and accused me of ogling other women. I denied I'd even noticed the blonde, but that only made matters worse. Right in the middle of the sidewalk, this was. The things she called me in that high-pitched voice of hers. To think that before we were married she sang in a choir, and I used to think what a lovely soprano voice she had! It's funny how things—okay, doctor, I'm right there now. It's just going to happen.

"There we were in the middle of the sidewalk, with everybody stopping to stare and wink and nudge one another. It was terrible, believe me." He squirmed at the memory of it. "And then— everything disappeared! The street disappeared, and the people, taking my wife with them. Even the sun disappeared."

"A poetic description, Mr. Saunders. You fainted?"

"No, I didn't. I was in a different place entirely. Not only different from the place I'd been in the second before, but different from any place I'd ever visited in my life, or any place I'd seen at the movies or in magazines.

"The sun was double, for one thing, and—well, it was like looking at a 3-D picture without glasses. There was a blue sun and a yellow sun, set close together and casting a queer kind of double shadow. I was standing on the edge of a forest of blue plants, and the ground was soft and reddish-brown like a carpet of little curled-up ferns."

"Yes, I see. There is a mention of it in your history. There is also the statement that you are a non-drinker. Is that strictly true, Mr. Saunders? Answer me frankly, please. I am here to help you."

"The most I ever have is a glass of beer on a hot day. Wait a minute! You're not trying to convince me I was *drunk*, are you?"

"Now, now. Nothing of the kind.

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I just have to make sure of the facts."

"Well, that's all right. I suppose it does sound as if I was drunk. But I wasn't. I was dead sober."

"Then may I compliment you on a very vivid imagination?" said Dr. Jessup.

"But it isn't imagination," Henry wailed. "You told me you were used to cases like mine. Now you try and tell me it's all imagination."

"Come, come, Mr. Saunders. Why do you take my attribution to you of a vivid imagination as something derogatory? Why, the power of imagination has shaped history."

"But I *was* there. I *know*—because first of all I looked all round and couldn't believe it myself. The first thing I thought of was that it was some kind of advertising stunt. I mean, ever since I saw a tank full of mermaids coming down the street to advertise somebody's bathing suits, I've learned not to be surprised at anything. But I was standing there all alone. I looked down at myself, and there I was. Just me, standing on the edge of this blue forest.

"And then I thought that if I was *there,* wherever it was, then I couldn't be with my wife, and goodness knows what she would be thinking, and that started to get me scared. Then—I was suddenly back in the street again."

"Standing?"

"Eh, Oh, there you go again. You don't believe me, do you? You think I fainted or something, and dreamed it all. Well, I *was* standing. I can tell you, it shook my wife. It's the first time I'd left her speechless for years. She didn't say another word all the way home. I only saw her out of the corner of my eye, looking at me queerly every now and then.

"But as soon as we got home she became something like her old self. She said she'd have to be more careful than ever, because I was obviously even more cunning than she'd thought. She was convinced I'd slipped away somehow into the crowd."

"Yes, yes," said Dr. Jessup. It fell into a familiar pattern. "Now, have you had another of these attacks since then?"

"Two more," Henry said. "I've had another one since I last saw Dr. Nyren."

"And were all three of them preceded by your wife's tirades?"

"No. But the next one was. She was carrying on as usual with some fantastic accusation when I pretended I was going out of the door to escape her voice—and I *did*. I walked out of the door and seemed to walk straight into this other place."

"And the last time?"

"I was sitting at home. My wife was out shopping. I was feeling horribly strung about the things that had been happening to me—this trouble, I mean, and it just happened."

"And you see the same landscape every time?"

"Yes, I did. From different

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angles, but it's always the same place. There's a stream there I saw once, and the last couple of times I've seen a woman. The first time from a distance, and when she saw me she ran back into the forest. But the second time I turned up almost beside her, and she didn't run away. We even held a conversation, if you can call it that. I said 'Good morning,' and she laughed a deep chuckling laugh and said something in a strange language. And then I talked to her a bit more. She seemed quite—er, friendly."

"Ah!" said Dr. Jessup. "A *beautiful* woman?"

"Yes, I suppose you could call her that. She was a bit different from ordinary women, though. She had honey-colored skin, and bright copper-colored hair. And she wore a sort of tennis frock, though it was green, not white."

"And she had a deep voice, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me, what is the color of your wife's hair?"

"Uh—dark brown, brunette," said Henry, bewildered.

"The whole thing is crystal-clear," said the great doctor urbanely.

"It is?" said Henry. "Well, it certainly takes a weight off my mind to hear you say that."

"Yes, yours is a quite straightforward case of paranoid dementia. It is nothing to be alarmed about, and I am quite confident that we shall have you cured in a short time. What has happened is this:

"Under the stress of marital disharmony you have sought refuge in another world, a world of your own creating. You love bright colors, for instance. *So*—the world you create is a brightly-colored one. Similarly, the woman you create there is the exact opposite of your wife. Brunette—redhead. High, piercing voice—low, melodious voice. This other woman speaks a language you do not understand, in contrast to the language of your wife which you understand only too well. Isn't that correct?"

"Yes—I mean no, *no.*"

"Ah, you fear I have brought the truth too brutally to the surface. You refuse to recognize these fantasies for what they are. But try to see the truth, Mr. Saunders. As the proud motto of this Foundation proclaims, truth is the beginning of healing."

"I *won't* admit it." Henry writhed in his seat. "It isn't true. What you say about high voice and low voice, and all that, may be right—but I *don't* imagine it."

"*No,* Mr. Saunders? But we can prove it. For your delusion carries within itself the image of its unreality. In the sky of your imagining hangs the very symbol of your dilemma. *A double sun.* Two suns of complimentary colors, the image of the double nature of your existence. One might say, the image of your *guilt.* For you cannot overcome a sense of guilt that you are

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retreating from reality, and that guilt obtrudes in visual symbolic terms, until its menacing presence compels you to return."

In his eloquence the great Dr. Jessup had raised himself from his chair and leaned over the desk so that his face was very close to Henry's. Henry had become increasingly agitated at the analyst's delineation of his case. He, too, rose to his feet, but in fear and bewilderment.

"*No,*" he cried.

Dr. Jessup was used to the effects of exposition on patients. He advanced round the desk to Henry to reassure him. But Henry backed away in panic.

"Don't come near me," he cried.

And then it happened.

He disappeared.

Dr. Jessup's eyes popped in astonishment. He groped his way back to his chair, flopped down and poured himself a stiff jigger of whiskey.

Delusions?

He would have thought so and ordered himself a complete and long rest—if he hadn't been a witness to Henry's own tenacious defense of the reality of his translation. He pulled himself together quickly with the reminder that his life had been dedicated to sanity, and to logic. And logic in this case pointed in only one direction. That his patient had, in cold fact, disappeared—bodily. There was only one thing to do. He must wait for his return.

He flipped the intercom switch.

"Miss Coad, I am under no circumstances to be disturbed, not even by yourself."

Then he settled back in his chair and waited.

Six . . . seven minutes passed. Then as suddenly as he had vanished, Henry returned in all of his indubitable solidity.

He jerked at his jacket with an air of injured dignity restored, and asked: "Well, *now* do you believe me?"

"*Amazing,*" said Dr. Jessup. "Truly amazing. I've never heard of a case like yours in all of my experience. Could you stay here at the Foundation for a few days for observation?"

"Oh, no," said Henry quickly. "I couldn't do that. I just wouldn't be able to explain it to my wife."

"A pity. You are something unique, you know. Do you think if *I* explained—?"

"Impossible," Henry said firmly. He was beginning to feel an unusual sense of confidence. He had succeeded in refuting this doctor's allegations that he was crazy. Not only that, his case—however disturbing—was *unique*. Still, his confidence was not strong enough to bear the thought of his wife being acquainted with the situation.

"Well," said Dr. Jessup, "you'll have to give me time to consider your case. Come back the day after tomorrow. At—ahem, any time to suit your convenience."

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"But isn't there anything you can do now?"

Even the great Dr. Jessup was reduced to a routine procedure. "Take these," he said abstractedly, counting out ten pheno-barb pills into a box. "One, three times a day."

"Well, all right," said Henry dubiously. He made for the door, then turned back.

"Oh, just in case you might let second thoughts convince you that we both imagined it." And he placed on the desk a curled fern of a curiously bright reddish-brown color.

Dr. Jessup picked it up and turned it over in his hand as his patient departed. He was no botanist, but he knew this hadn't come from anywhere on Earth.

He gazed at it for long minutes in utter silence. Then a gleam came into his eye. He buzzed the outer office again.

"Miss Coad, come in here immediately. I have a little job for you."

Henry Saunders did not come back until the afternoon of the appointed day. But Dr. Jessup had cancelled all his engagements for the day, anyway.

"Well?" he said as soon as Henry entered. "How have you been?"

"I've been all right, thanks," said Henry. "I haven't gone over to the other place once. It must be those pills you gave me. But my wife's been worse than ever. I don't understand what's been happening. She says that women have been phoning up and asking for me. My life these last couple of days has been an absolute nightmare."

"A case of clinical experiment, I'm afraid," said Dr. Jessup urbanely. "It had to be done."

"You mean *you*—?"

"My secretary, Miss Coad, was merely phoning to wish you well. It was essential to—ah—hot up your environment."

"But I don't see—"

"My dear fellow," the analyst interrupted him, "your worries are over. Your problem is solved—really solved this time. When you left here I gave you an ordinary sedative before I realized what your trouble was. When I did realize it, and at the same time realized that a simple sedative might well be the cure, I had to ensure that your nerves received optimum jangling, so to speak. They obviously did. But the sedative worked, and prevented your suffering a four-dimensional spasm."

"A *what?*"

"Yes, it is rather a clumsy name, I must admit. I must go through the Greek dictionary and find something better. But it does express what in fact has been happening to you. Under powerful emotional stress you twitch. Simply that. But instead of an ordinary twitch, yours is a four-dimensional one. In other words, instead of merely twitching in this world, in three dimensions,

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you somehow twitch yourself right out of it into another world next door to this one in a higher dimension.

"In some way the translation temporarily relieves the tension, but before long you begin to feel agitated again at the consequences—and you twitch back. It seems that all your condition needs is a sedative taken regularly. Here's a prescription for a hundred pills. Carry on with your three a day. I'll renew the prescription every time you run low."

"Thanks," said Henry, taking the prescription. "Thanks a lot. I'm very grateful."

"We are here to serve," said Dr. Jessup avuncularly. "There is just one other point, though. Because your case is absolutely unique, you will appreciate that I am most anxious to report it to the medical world. I should therefore be most obliged if you would give me a detailed account of your experience, and of this other world.

"I also hope that at some date in the near future you will consent to dispense with the sedative, here under observation, and give a demonstration of your remarkable ability before selected colleagues."

"Sure, doctor. Anything. But I can't stop now. I must get back home. You know how it is."

Henry was thinking hard as he handed the prescription over the drugstore counter. He was thinking about the other world that now he would never see again, and of the long years that stretched in front of him. He had had an adventure, a strange and disturbing one it was true, but he had had precious few adventures in his life. And now that it was all over he felt regretful and miserable. Then he suddenly brightened. He jerked out his pen and made a rapid calculation.

"Say, can you let me have another fifty thousand of those?" he said as the clerk returned to the counter with the pills.

"*Fifty thousand!* Are you crazy? That's enough to commit suicide five hundred times over? Anyway, they're on prescription only."

"But I'm—er—going on a long trip."

The clerk regarded him quizzically. "It must be some trip if you want fifty thousand of these. Anyway, you can get them anywhere in the world on doctor's orders."

"But—but I'm going to the jungle," said Henry despairingly.

"An explorer, eh?" said the clerk, looking Henry up and down in obvious disbelief. "You don't look the explorer type to me. But look, what you want them for is none of my business. Bromide has the same effect and you don't have to have a prescription. You can have a million pot bromides if you like."

"Fifty thousand will do," said Henry, breathing a sigh of relief. "You're sure they're the same."

"They're not the same. But as I said, they have the same effect. They're sedative."

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"Sedative? Yes, that's right. How much will that be?"

On his way home he stopped at a bar and ordered a whiskey—something he'd never done before in his life. He was about to swallow it, when the thought struck him it might somehow affect what he had in mind. It was best to be on the safe side. He took the whiskey to the wash room, swilled the fiery liquor around in his mouth, and then spat it out. He didn't like the taste of the stuff, but he was sure that it had alcoholized his breath satisfactorily.

He greeted his wife warmly the moment he got in. That warmth alone was enough to have put her on her guard. But when she smelt his breath as he bent to kiss her, her worse suspicions were confirmed.

Such a tirade ensued as Henry had never heard before.

He waited. He hadn't taken a pill. He waited patiently. The tirade mounted higher and higher, but nothing happened. He was being too deliberate about it, he realized, far too calm. He plucked up every shred of his resolution, and advanced upon his wife fearlessly.

"Don't talk to me like that, woman," he thundered. His own temerity frightened him, and it worked . . .

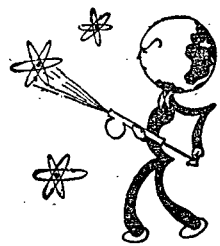
He was standing on reddish-brown fern, with a double sun of blue and yellow shining down on him. He opened the sizeable package of bromide pills and took one. Then he sat down on the ferny carpet and waited. He looked at his watch. Ten minutes ticked by. Twenty.

That was that. That was twice as long as he'd ever stayed before. So the tablets *did* work just as well on this side. He felt a sudden pang on realizing that he'd never be able now to give Dr. Jessup the cooperation he'd asked for. But he easily put the thought from his head. Perhaps another case would turn up to give the doctor the confirmation he wanted.

He rose and called out.

An answering cry came from the blue forest—a low, sweet voice. He saw a flash of green leaping towards him through the leaves.

Henry heaved a deep sigh of contentment.



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grand rounds

by . . . Alan E. Nourse

It's hard on a doctor when his patient has almost every disease known to man—in short jumps and spasms. But the Chief was wise!

IT WAS a gray day at the office.

The Vice-President-in-charge-of-Promotion met Accounts-Outstanding as he bustled down North Corridor and fell in step with him with a weary shrug. "Trouble again?" he asked.

Accounts-Outstanding nodded. "The Old Man really blew his lid. Heads are falling right and left down there." He glanced at his watch with a worried sigh. "And with business the way it is—"

"Wonder what the trouble is this time?"

"Is it ever any different? Delinquencies, always delinquencies—"

"Well, at least Promotion is in the clear."

"The way your boys handled that last campaign? Hah!" Accounts tapped his heels nervously on the shiny red floor. They reached the elevators, and stepped aboard an Express. "And late for the meeting, too. Oh, I don't like it a *bit*—" Accounts nodded sharply to the elevator operator. "Executive Suite," he said.

The operator scowled, and flicked his tail. The elevator rocketed downward.

If you've ever had a desire to visit one of our great modern hospitals and accompany a head surgeon on his daily rounds here's your chance to do just that. We're not quite sure, though, that the hospital won't collapse suddenly with a dull, appalling roar and that you won't find yourself in the debris staring up at Black John himself. But be that as it may, Alan E. Nourse does guarantee you high-voltage entertainment. And many a chuckle.

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In the meeting hall, the silence was tomblike. They were late indeed—three ticks by the clock as they slid into their places at the long red table. From his seat at the end the Old Man favored them with a glare. Then he swept the glare around the room, taking pains to spare no one.

"There's one thing around here that I don't like," the Old Man grated. The glare swung back to Accounts-Outstanding. "Do you know what that is?"

Accounts nodded unhappily. He wriggled like a trapped mouse. "Delinquencies," he said in a tiny voice.

"Delinquencies." The word hung pregnant in the room. Then: *"Well?"*

Accounts squirmed. "I—I'm *certain* we have no delinquent accounts on the books—"

The Old Man snarled. "You're certain, are you? Let's have a report on Account Number—" He cleared his throat, and gave the exact file number. It was 32664910-773.

There was a wild flurry of underlings about the room. Reams of paper were riffled; file cards descended like a snowstorm. From the bottom of a huge pile a clerk dug out a sheet of legal foolscap and thrust it into Accounts' trembling hand.

Accounts read it. He looked up pathetically. "There's been a mistake, sir."

"The Account is delinquent!"

Accounts shook his head miserably. "That Account is not Closed, sir."

The Old Man leaned forward slowly. "It was scheduled to Close last night. Coronary thrombosis. I arranged the circumstances personally—"

"It's that man. They called that man again."

At the end of the table the Old Man seemed to swell visibly. "The same one who interfered last time?"

"Yes, sir."

There was silence for a long, long moment. Then the Old Man said: "I don't like him. He meddles. Three times in one month now. How many times in a year? Thirty? Forty? Or four hundred?" He paused, glaring around the table. "And every time we've lost the Account altogether. I don't like that man. I want him stopped."

Accounts-Outstanding wiped droplets from his forehead. His palms were damp. "What can I do?" he whimpered. "We've tried everything."

"Enlist him!" the Old Man roared.

"He won't enlist."

"Then buy him off!"

"He's already rich. And he hates women."

"Destroy him!"

"Sir, you know we can't tamper—"

The Old Man let out a howl, and sank back in his chair. Two small red underlings hovered at either side, watching him jealously. His eyes roamed the room, then lit

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on a small, brown, gopher-faced individual sitting in a shadowy corner. "You!"

Gopher Face took another pull at his cigar, and looked up indifferently. "Yeah, Boss?"

"You've handled some nasty ones before. What do you have on this meddler?"

Gopher Face pulled a grubby note-sheet from his vest pocket. "John Ross McEwen, M.D.," he read, slurring his syllables a little. "Chief of Medical Services at St. Christopher's Hospital. Alias 'Chief.' Alias 'The Professor.' Alias 'Black John.' Alias 'Old Angina.' Et cetera . . . Knows his medicine, but nobody loves him. Quite a prima donna. Crotchety old coot. Thinks he's God. When it comes to diagnosis, he's damned near right. Students hate his guts. Interns hide when they see him coming. Pathologists been trying to hang him for forty-seven years, and never got close. Beat out four top staff men for the Professorship five years ago. Four top staff men hate his guts—" Gopher Face sighed. "Et cetera, et cetera."

The Old Man's eyes flickered. "You're not impressed?"

"Not much."

"How would *you* stop him?"

"Discredit him," Gopher Face said.

Accounts-Outstanding choked. "Ridiculous. He knows his medicine. He doesn't make mistakes—"

Gopher Face sneered.

The Old Man leaned forward. "I want it done right. No nonsense. Can you handle it?"

"It's a cinch."

"All right. *Get him.*"

Gopher Face put down his cigar and stretched lazily to his feet. "Anything you say, Boss," he said.

THE INTERN on Receiving Ward saw him first.

It had been a long, hard day, and the intern was in no mood for any nonsense. He had finally waded through the evening's lineup of spells and miseries, and was heading for some sack time when the police ambulance drew up.

The intern sighed wearily, and swore to Aesculapius that if this was another long-winded lady with a neurotic gall bladder, he would personally throw her out on her ear.

But it wasn't. The patient was a little brown-skinned man with a gopher face, carried into a cubicle by two burly policemen. He was doubled up in a ball, clutching his middle as though his life depended on it, and groaning in agony.

"Found him down on Market Street," the officer volunteered. "He was walking up from the subway, and all of a sudden it hit him. Doubled him up like a jackknife—"

The little man lay very still on the cot, panting. He was thin as a skeleton; his clothes hung from his legs like torn cobwebs. Under a four-day beard, his face was twisted in agony.

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"Please don't touch me, Doc," he moaned. "Oh, I'm dying—"

"Started suddenly, eh?"

The little man nodded painfully. "Just like somebody stabbed me. I think I passed out—"

"Does it hurt when you move?"

"Oh, my, yes. It's not so bad if I can hold still—"

The intern nodded. Carefully, he began the examination. The man's abdomen was rigid as a board. His pulse was thready; perspiration rolled from his forehead. The intern felt a warm sensation at the back of his neck. A few pointed questions, a quick examination—why couldn't they all be like this? Whistling cheerfully, he picked up the telephone and buzzed the surgical resident.

"Got some work for you, buster," he said. "Duodenal ulcer—perforated about half an hour ago. I'll admit him and send him up."

Feeling vastly pleased with himself, the intern wrote a brief admission history, sent the patient up to surgical ward, and retired to a rear examining room for an hour or two of much needed shut-eye.

He didn't sleep long.

The chief surgical resident was shaking him roughly by the shoulder. "Get up," he said.

"Wha-wha-wha—oh! You." The intern blinked. "You see that patient all right?"

The surgical resident leaned over him menacingly. He sniffed. "You been drinking?"

The intern jolted upright. *"Huh?"*

"That patient. Did you admit him to surgical ward?"

"Of course I did."

"Surgical ward?"

"Why, my God yes! With a stomach like that—"

"Where did you learn your surgery, Bud?" The resident slapped a chart down on his lap. "You write up this history?"

The intern stared at him. "Certainly I did. Perforated ulcer. A textbook case if I ever saw one." He looked bewildered. "What's wrong?"

The resident gave him a long, compassionate look. "Let's take a little walk," he said.

In the ward they found the patient, propped up against four pillows, gasping and blue. Every breath was an effort, punctuated with desperate groans. From clear across the room the intern could hear bubbling sounds. Slowly his ears began to redden.

The surgical resident handed him a stethoscope. "Listen to his chest."

The intern listened. It sounded like Niagara Falls in there.

"Now put your hand on his stomach."

The intern obeyed.

"You see? No rigidity. No pain."

The intern swallowed hard.

"Duodenal ulcer, huh? Perforated, yet! Four years of medical school, and you need a surgeon to

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diagnose heart failure for you." The resident looked at him in disgust. "Go on back to bed."

A red-eared intern spent the rest of the night trying to find out who was on third—

In the morning a red- eared surgical resident joined him in the search. It wasn't that he had done anything *wrong,* exactly. He had personally supervised the patient's transfer to the medical ward, and had called Dr. Porter, the junior medical ward chief, himself. He couldn't help it if Dr. Porter felt a trifle bilious at being jerked out of bed at four in the morning. It would be the resident's neck if the patient should expire before a staff man had a look at him.

And anyway, he had no way of knowing that Dr. Porter would arrive at full tilt to examine a patient in cardiac failure and find himself, quite suddenly, dealing with a thin, voluble brown-skinned little man with quite a different diagnosis indeed.

When Dr. Porter finally got the surgical resident on the phone, he didn't waste time with politeness. He indicated that the resident's presence was desired up on medical ward, in terms that were clear, not to say pithy. Dr. Porter bore no love for surgical residents on any account. Surgeons were a smug, self-satisfied lot.

Dr. Porter had heard too many times that unpleasant little fiction that the surgeons "walk a little faster, work a little harder, and practice a little better grade of medicine than the other side of the house." He snorted, and paced the chart-room floor. The sort of thing that Black John McEwen might say, he thought sourly. Why couldn't *that* old goat have been a surgeon? He fitted the mold—

The surgical resident arrived, red-faced and panting. Dr. Porter smiled a nasty little smile, and thrust a chart into the resident's hand. "Doctor, do you mean to tell me you diagnosed this case as *congestive heart failure?"*

Something inside the resident went cold. "I—I—yes, sir."

"With an abdomen like that?"

"Abdomen?"

"With a white blood count like that?"

"I—I—"

"How long have you been a surgeon, Doctor?"

"I—I—"

Dr. Porter snorted again. "Too busy to examine the patients these days, eh? When I was in medical school they taught us a few elements of physical diagnosis. But then I guess medical education is different now."

The resident was staring at the chart in horror. "But this is ridiculous!"

"You're telling me," said Dr. Porter. "Perhaps you know the extension number for the Operating Room, Doctor?"

"Of course I do."

"Then I suggest you call them up and tell them to schedule an

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emergency appendectomy, Doctor. Your patient is about to rupture."

Dr. Porter had just reached the cafeteria for a cup of coffee when the call came for him. All was politeness and deference in the junior Board surgeon's voice as he called Dr. Porter's attention to the patient they had just wheeled into the Operating Room corridor.

Was Dr. Porter *quite* sure he had sent up the right patient? Oh, no, nothing irregular. There just seemed to be a difference of opinion about the diagnosis. Of course, it *might* be a hot appendix, but it seemed much more like a strangulated hernia. Would Dr. Porter care to come up and corroborate the findings?

Dr. Porter set his coffee cup down with a trembling hand, and headed at a dead run for the Operating Room . . . .

But the uneasiness at St. Christopher's Hospital was not relieved in the Operating Room. A certain complacent anaesthetist lost a degree of complacency when he found himself anaesthetizing a patient who simply didn't anaesthetize.

The Board surgeon paced the Operating Room floor, gowned and gloved, glaring first at the patient, then at the anaesthetist, while the latter felt rows of wet beads forming under his scrub cap. For half an hour he had fiddled with the dials. Now the gauge of the cyclopropane machine was open to the hilt, and the anaesthetist covered the dial nervously with his hand for fear someone would see it.

Minutes passed. Finally the surgeon strode across the room to pinch the patient's stomach experimentally. The patient cried "Ouch!" and jumped a foot off the table.

The surgeon swore. "Doctor, can't you do *something* to anaesthetize this man?"

In desperation the anaesthetist shot fifteen cc's of intravenous pentothal into the patient's arm. They waited patiently for the snores to begin. Then, as the surgeon poised for the *coup d'essai,* the little brown man hiccupped, and complained that if they didn't do something about that throbbing, he thought his head would split open.

The surgeon withdrew in a pique, belaboring the anaesthetist's ancestry, while the anaesthetist burst into tears of frustration and retired his staff position on the spot.

Later, the senior medical ward chief, an internist by specialty, clarified the patient's diagnosis in a five-minute examination. "Throbbing occipital headaches? Light flashes in the eyes? Good heavens, Doctor, haven't you taken this man's blood pressure yet? 290 over 175, you say?"

A hasty administration of apresoline took care of *that,* all right, as the patient abruptly went into shock, his blood pressure dropping below measurable levels—

There was talk. Not very much, and very, very quiet. But the word

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got around the hospital. Of all things painful to a physician, admitting a diagnostic blooper is the most agonizing. The little brown man with the gopher face became as popular as a drunken house guest. Or just a little more so.

"Take a look at him? Not me! Let somebody up the ladder worry about him." A visiting staff man shook his head vehemently as the topic arose in a corridor conference. "Although I must say the diagnosis seems perfectly obvious. I read about a case just like it in the Journal of Endocrinology last May. Parkinson at Harvard reported it. Functional pheochromocytoma of the left adrenal—"

"But it might have been a dissecting aneurysm. Of course you know 40 percent of the time they'll give an atypical history—"

"—conversion hysteria, plain and simple. Get a good psychiatrist to talk to the man."

"But what are they going to *do* with him?"

"Doctor, the management of a case like this presents many problems. Now, if *I* were handling the case—"

"—not me, thank god. Dusseldorf is the ward chief handling him now. I hear he's been spiking a 105° fever."

Somebody said: "Maybe they should present him at Grand Rounds."

There was silence in the circle.

Little smiles appeared.

"Say! Grand Rounds—"

"Now *there* is a pregnant suggestion!"

"Turn Old Angina loose on him."

"Or vice versa. Say! Wouldn't *that* make the old goat squirm? Where's Dusseldorf? *He'd* be glad to get off the hook. He can let his resident present the case. And I can just see Black John McEwen putting his foot in it this time."

Heads drew closer together. Ten minutes later an emissary hurried off to find Dr. Dusseldorf . . .

GRAND ROUNDS were the tradition at St. Christopher's Hospital. They had been held at 8:00 on alternate Thursday mornings for years before John Ross McEwen had become Chief of Medicine there. The tradition was maintained. He had never missed a session; indeed, it was whispered about the hospital corridors that the day he missed Grand Rounds would be the day he dropped dead.

But tradition alone couldn't account for his faithfulness. John Ross McEwen was not a modest man. He had enjoyed the center of the stage when he first began to establish himself as "that smart young diagnostician from Boston" so many years before and the passing years had merely whetted his appetite. On Grand Rounds he held the center of the stage, alone and undisputed.

He loved it. He fairly wallowed in it. Nothing could delight his crabbed old soul more than a tense,

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vibrating Thursday morning session as he stood at a bedside discussing a difficult case, surrounded by the eyes of his colleagues, watchful and eager. He knew what they were waiting for, all right. He knew they were waiting for the Chief to put his foot in it as he turned to a patient with a problem in diagnosis. He knew, and took all the more pleasure in burning the ears off the intern, resident, or staff man unfortunate enough to have blundered.

But the eager eyes had waited in vain. Week after week, year after year, they had waited and hoped. And waited, and waited. Because the Chief *didn't* put his foot in it. That was why he had his reputation.

The underlings were patient. He'll get old, they told themselves. Those quick, sly eyes will lose their sharpness. He'll misread a history, someday, misinterpret a sign. He can't go on forever. Someday, they said—

And John Ross McEwen, Chief of Medicine at St. Christopher's Hospital, laughed in their faces. And went on forever.

He was early this particular morning. Grand Rounds started at eight o'clock on the dot—but this morning they started at five minutes before the hour. The great doctor walked briskly into the medical ward ante-room, rubbing his hands in anticipation. His white hair was slicked back against his temples and his cheeks gleamed from the chill morning air—he walked the mile to the hospital each day, to the distress of his housekeeper, who feared for his coronaries—and the old, chipped stethoscope peered from the pocket of his long white clinical coat.

If he could surprise the staff by starting a bit early now and then, all the better. It put the shoe on the right foot to start with. And this way, too, he could indulge in his favorite sport. He could stop short in the middle of an examination, when some ill-advised intern drifted in, and glare over his silver-rimmed spectacles until everybody present knew, beyond doubt, that An Intern Had Come Late To Grand Rounds.

But this week no one was late. They stood, chatting quietly in the ante-room: four senior staff men, three junior staff men, ten residents, five interns, three medical students, and two nurses, standing in groups, whispering and laughing. When he walked into the room, silence fell like a shroud.

He eyed the group sharply. He hadn't diagnosed for forty-seven years without learning to read faces. There was tension here, an anticipation stronger than he had ever remembered. He rubbed his hands together, perhaps a trifle nervously. Something was in the wind.

His greetings were brief, as always. An instant later he was flying down the ward, his cortege following like a plague of locusts, white coats flapping. Around the first bed

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they gathered—senior staff men in the inner circle, flanked by their junior assistants and chief residents. Crowding close behind, like layers of an onion, were the junior residents and interns. And far out on the periphery the medical students scribbled in their notebooks and tried desperately to hear what was going on.

It was routine, at first. An aged lady in uremia; an old man with a swollen liver; a young man with puzzling cardiac findings.

"You've never heard of beri-beri, Doctor? You think just because *you* eat well that everybody else does too? Look at his tongue! Look at his lips! Doctor, when you hear heart sounds like that you *must not rest* until you have a definitive diagnosis! Your patient may die if you do."

Dr. McEwen rubbed his hands together and marched on to the next bed, warming to his task. Faces flushed, ears turned red. The great doctor smiled to himself and hurried on down the ward. And the tension rose—

He reached the bed at the end of the ward. A small, gopher-faced, brown-skinned man looked up at him and blinked. Dr. McEwen took his professorial stance at the foot of the bed, closed his eyes, and waited.

Nothing happened. He looked around sharply, storm clouds gathering. "Well? Who's presenting this patient?"

A very green young intern cleared his throat. "I—I guess I am, sir."

"You guess! Come, now, Doctor—either you are or you aren't. Speak up! We can't spend all morning here. What is your diagnosis of this patient?"

"I—we don't—that is, there seems to be some difference of opinion, sir."

Someone in the rear circle choked back a laugh. Dr. McEwen leaned forward slowly. He took the chart. "*Is* there, now! Are you saying that this man has been in the hospital for five days, and no diagnosis has been made?"

"Oh, no, sir. That is, *several* diagnoses have been made."

The circle of eyes were watching him now, waiting. Something deep in the great doctor's mind whispered a warning as he stared down at the patient in the bed. An *odd* looking man. Almost the image of old Mr. Barnard—but that was last week. Still, the resemblance was remarkable, in a subtle sort of way. He snorted, and started flipping pages on the chart.

He stopped at page four, and read for a moment. Then he reread. Then he shuffled back to page two, and read some more.

The chill deepened. He had been practicing clinical medicine for forty-seven years. In these hospital beds he had seen, diagnosed and treated every condition in Cecil's Textbook of Medicine. He had reviewed histories of every description and complexity. He had more

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clinical experience than any other man in the room.

But he had never seen a history like this.

Slowly he set the chart down, and walked to the patient. His head was high; long years of experience had taught him to keep his thoughts from reflecting in his face, and his lips by habit curled into a small, confident smile.

He looked down at the patient. Browner than old Barnard, thinner by far. A more—crafty—face than old Barnard, but the resemblance clung to his mind. He stared at the patient.

The little brown man also had a small, confident smile.

He took the patient's pulse. Then he said, "How are you feeling now?"

"Oh, I don't feel so good, Doc." The patient's voice was weak and squeaky.

"What seems to be bothering you?"

"Doc, I don't know. I been awful sick, lately. Can't seem to hold down my meals."

"Is *that* so! All your meals?"

The patient's eyes were wide and innocent. "Oh, no, Doc. Just breakfast."

Something congealed in the great doctor's chest. "Anything else troubling you at the moment?"

"Well, sometimes I get dizzy spells. And then there's my pain." He patted his abdomen feebly.

"You have pain down there?"

"Well, I couldn't really call it *pain,* Doc." The smile was wider now, showing little yellow teeth. "It's a sort of *heaviness*—" He made vague gestures in the air.

Dr. McEwen took a deep breath. The circle of doctors was closer now, hanging on every word. The eyes were no longer so malignant. They were waiting, true, but now they were puzzled and interested as well.

Too damned interested.

Suddenly, frantically, he wanted to think. He removed the patient's night shirt, and brought his stethoscope down to the scrawny brown chest. He didn't listen. He knew that he had forty long, unchallengable seconds to think in, and he used them. Then, slowly, reluctantly, he went on to complete the physical examination. It confirmed his deepest fear.

It was ridiculous and impossible. It was fiendish.

The man was pregnant.

For one horrible instant Dr. McEwen saw a mental picture of the faces around him when he said, "Gentlemen, we are dealing with a case of pregnancy—" He shuddered, and bit his tongue just in time. That would be all he'd need to say. They'd take over from there.

"The old goat went balmy," they'd say. "Cracked up right in the middle of Grand Rounds!" And ten years later they'd still be laughing.

But it was true. Ridiculous—but there the patient was, grinning up at him.

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Fiendish. More than unnerving.

He handed the chart to the intern, trying to quiet his trembling hand. Time! He had to have time. Something was wrong here, something just out of his grasp, if only he had time to *think*—

"Doctor," he said. "I'd be pleased if you would review this history in detail."

The intern started reading. Dr. McEwen stared hard at the patient. There was no doubt of it. He lay there, thin and brown and very pregnant. His grin was suddenly a malignant smirk.

No man ever got pregnant. It just didn't happen. Oh, there were cases—unpleasant things that the tabloids loved—but they were never the real thing. But then, no man ever had a history like this. That, too, was impossible. But that could only mean—

He was treading thin ice with that train of thought, and he knew it. There was no place in medicine for wild speculation. His colleagues in the circle around him knew that. They could think clearly within the limits of hard, established fact, and not one centimeter farther. And they had not made a diagnosis.

An impossible problem. Then why not an impossible solution?

Carefully, he let his mind drift back, groping for something. Old Mr. Barnard. The resemblance couldn't be denied. As though, somehow, he were being taunted with the face. But Barnard hadn't died. He would have died, if the diagnosis hadn't been made. Funny guy, old Barnard. Got religion since that tight squeeze last week.

"Thought the Devil had me sure that time, Doc," he'd said and he'd grinned through his beard. "Figure I'd better square things away a bit—"

Ah, yes, old Barnard. Like lots of old folks, lasting on beyond their time. Tight squeezes nowadays often ended up in the patient's favor. Not like the old days, when they died young, in the height of their sinfulness. He pulled his lower lip thoughtfully. Pickings must be getting slimmer and slimmer down below, with so many folks having twenty years of old age to repent in.

He felt something catch in his mind. Ridiculous? Maybe. Fiendish? Beyond doubt. He gave the patient a long, long look. Then, suddenly, he roared with laughter.

"A curious history," he cried, cutting off the intern in mid-sentence. "Curious indeed. The most remarkable patient I've seen in years." He wiped tears from his eyes as he faced the circle of doctors. "Of course, the diagnosis is perfectly clear."

Jaws sagged. Smiles faded, and the chuckle in the back row slithered into a curious bubbling sound. McEwen leaned forward, smiling slyly at the intern. "Well, Doctor?"

The intern struggled for words. "Perhaps—perhaps a few more days observation—"

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"Observation? Bah! You've had five days too long as it is. Well, how about the rest of you? Dr. Porter? How would you handle this patient?"

Dr. Porter sputtered. "Obviously, we're dealing with a most curious picture here. I'm afraid the psychosomatic overtones have obscured the true picture so completely—"

Dr. McEwen chuckled. "Psychosomatic overtones, eh? I see. Well, what do the surgeons have to say?"

The surgeons scuffed their feet. Nobody said a word. Dr. McEwen turned slowly to the man in bed. The patient's smile wasn't as broad now. His eyes held a hint of uneasiness.

Dr. McEwen beamed, and said, "Relax, my friend. Don't worry about a thing. We know all about you." He whipped a prescription pad from his pocket, scribbled something on it, and handed it to the intern. "Take this to Dr. Arnham's lab downstairs, and get it filled. And make it fast."

The intern read the sheet. His eyes bugged. He hesitated a moment, then gulped, and took off.

"I'm sure," Dr. McEwen said, "that we can dispose of this case without any difficulty. Heroic therapy, but very effective."

He looked up as the intern hurried back, clutching a small, extremely heavy box containing a vial of fluid. Carefully the great doctor filled a syringe, turning to the bed. "Now, if you'll just hold out your arm—*get him, boys! Don't let him run!*"

For a sick man, Gopher Face had become suddenly agile. He got one close look at the heavy box, let out a terrified squeak, and piled through the circle of doctors in wild panic.

They caught him finally, kicking and screaming, and piled him back into bed. Then, as they held him in a hammer-lock, John Ross McEwen himself made the intravenous injection.

"There," he murmured. "You're going to be a popular fellow when you get home."

The result was most curious. The little man clutched at his arm, his face drawn with horror. Then, with a howl of frustrated rage, he began to dwindle and shrivel like paper in a flame, his howls growing fainter and fainter, until with a barely perceptible shudder, he disappeared in a puff of smoke . . .

The case was never reported in the literature. Nothing much was said about it at the hospital, and not a word leaked to the outside world. From time to time curiosity gets the better of a junior staff man, and he raises the question on Grand Rounds. But Dr. McEwen merely looks pained and says, "Really, Doctor, I shouldn't have to explain such a case to a clinician of your stature—" and lets the matter drop.

And a bewildered intern is still trying to find out what condition of human pathology can be treated so effectively with seventy-five milligrams of radioactive silver.

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▷ Names to conjure with are scattered throughout all issues, for the stories are by the most competent writers of science fiction and fantasy in the genre—such greats as: Theodore Sturgeon, Lester del Rey, Isaac Asimov, Robert F. Young, Evelyn E. Smith, Poul Anderson, William Morrison, Robert Sheckley, F. B. Bryning, Manly Wade Wellman, Dal Stivens, Evan Hunter, Sam Merwin, Jr., Algis Budrys, Irving E. Cox, Jr., James Blish, Frank Belknap Long, James E. Gunn, Arthur Sellings, Theodore R. Cogswell, Horatio Winslow, Walter M. Miller, Jr., Judith Merril, Richard Matheson, Roger Dee, Hal Ellson, John Wyndham, Theodore Pratt, Philip Jose Farmer, Philip K. Dick, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Eric Frank Russell, Walt Sheldon, Ray Cummings, Robert Bloch, Margaret St. Clair, and many others.

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homesick lake

by . . . Norman Arkawy and Stanley Henig

Homesickness can be a grievous malady to a wayfarer in Space and Time. Especially if you've been cruelly torn up by the roots.

Homesick Lake is not a large body of water. It is perfectly circular and barely three hundred yards across. The water is not very deep and it evaporates almost completely during the dry season, which probably accounts for the fact that the lake remained undiscovered until only a few years ago.

Its existence was first suspected when a hunting party selected the area for a camp site and found water where the map said there was only forest. That was in '68. It's easy to remember the date because in that same year the lost Venus expedition went out . . .

COLONEL BERSIK nodded with satisfaction when he read the astrogator's report. ETA was 1150, less than forty minutes away. He flipped the switch on the intercom and contacted the radio room of the *Magellan*. Instantly, the squawk boxes all over the ship blared forth the commander's order.

"Stand by for landing! All hands stand by for landing!"

The crew strapped themselves in at their stations and double checked

Norman Arkawy is one of the most gifted of the newer group of science fantasy writers and unquestionably one of the most industrious, for his work appears frequently in all of the imaginative fiction magazines. Now in able collaboration with the resourceful Stanley Henig he has brought us one of those eerily enchanted glimpses of an alien world quite as thrilling as an epic journey by river boat through the Amazonian wilds.

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the instrument pads on the arms of their couches. In the troop compartments, the men donned their gear and took their weapons from the rack before securing themselves in their bunks.

There was a tense uneasiness throughout the ship. In the crowded compartments where the men of the Fourth Atomic Infantry Platoon waited, brows grew wet with perspiration and hands toyed nervously with the safety locks on the AD rifles.

The strain had become acute.

Up forward, in s-2, the astrogator put aside his charts and lay back against the cushions. He glanced across the small cubicle at the ship's exec. Major Denn lay immobile in his acceleration couch, staring at the bulkhead above his head. This was the major's first trip beyond Lunar.

The astrogator smiled sympathetically. "Nervous?" he asked.

Major Denn turned his head toward the older man. Their eyes met, and he smiled in sickly fashion. "A little."

"I know just how you feel," sympathized the astrogator. "I've been on nine flights and it still gets me—every time just before deceleration."

"I know," Denn said. "There's nothing you can do about it either. But that's not what worries me. It's those damn clouds! It was different on Mars. At least they could see what they were getting into there. But with those infernal clouds, Heaven only knows what's waiting for us!"

"Don't worry," the astrogator said. "Bersik knows what he's—"

They were pushed back abruptly into the pressure cushions as the ship roared into an orbital approach and began its deceleration.

Minutes later, the *Magellan* dropped down through the heavy clouds. Falling at controlled planetary speed, the silvery ball slipped through the dense atmosphere as effortlessly as a terrestrial airliner coming in for a landing from forty thousand feet.

When the last of the clouds drifted away behind them, Colonel Bersik stared anxiously out of the command view panel at the sloping expanse of green below. The radoguide had selected for a landing site a wide, flat plain in the midst of a steaming jungle. The huge spaceship glided gently down toward its destination.

The colonel watched the panorama below gradually narrow as the scene rushed up to him. There was a puzzled expression on his face. The plain below them was almost perfectly circular, its green, grass-like vegetation ringed by a vast, multi-colored jungle of trees. It was unnaturally geometrical.

A knocking on his door drew his attention away from the viewplate. "Come in!" he called out and turned to see Major Denn step over the sill of the doorway.

Bersik liked Denn. He was young—the youngest exec the colo-

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nel had ever had. And the best. He was the prototype of the clean-cut, intelligent young men the Corps pointed to with pride in its recruiting propaganda . . . They never mentioned the other kinds!

Denn saluted smartly. "Sir," he reported, "the ship is ready for touch-down. All personnel are belted in. Landing batteries A and B and boosters are ready to fire. Activation time—" he glanced at his wrist chrono—"one minute, seventeen seconds."

Several minutes later the *Magellan* rested on the scorched ground. The ship shuddered slightly as the power cut off, then was still.

S-3's analysis was encouraging, surprisingly so. The atmosphere was similar to Earth's—a bit more oxygen, slightly more CO^2, less nitrogen—and quite breathable. There was plenty of water vapor, heavily laden with strange perfumes, but no unknown microorganisms or spores.

The men left their space gear in the ship.

The area around the ship was explored carefully. Beyond the bare circle which the landing blast had burnt clean, the vegetation was heavy. Dark green grass lay on the land like a tightly-woven carpet. No bare ground, not a single rock marred the continuous expanse of green that stretched to the edge of the forest. The grass was wet and spongy underfoot.

The air was warm and dripping with moisture. It was thickly scented with a strange floral fragrance. The scented air was like a balm to the weary men of the *Magellan*. A single breath relaxed tense nerves and supplanted fidgety watchfulness with a calm, dreamy euphoria.

It felt wonderful.

Bersik looked up at the sky, a glaring gray dome of thick clouds that hid the sun and diffused its light over the entire heaven. His gaze traveled down to the horizon where the gray blended into a vivid splash of color that was the jungle. Red, green, orange, yellow—the multi-colored trees rose high into the air in a tangle of intertwining branches and tortuous vines.

He gazed drowsily at the beautiful colors. He breathed deeply the perfumed air. He closed his eyes and smiled happily, enjoying the sweet peacefulness of this marvelous place.

Forcing his mind back to thoughts of his assignment, Bersik pulled himself out of his lethargy and looked around him at the men in his command. They were all standing as he had stood, entranced by the calm beauty before them.

Hate to spoil their dreams, he thought dryly, *but . . .*

He turned to the exec. "Let's move the men out, Major."

Denn was startled by the suddenness of Bersik's voice breaking the profound silence and disturbing pleasant thoughts. Involuntarily, his muscles tensed and he caught his breath.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, quickly

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regaining his composure. "I guess I was daydreaming."

The colonel smiled sympathetically. "Wake the men up," he said, "and move them out. Let's see what that forest is like."

Slowly, the men headed for the jungle. The straggling columns of troops stretched out across the soggy field. They moved cautiously, on the alert for unknown dangers, but the intervening distance was covered without incident. Soon, the men in the point of the lead column stood in the shadow of the massive trees.

Huge trunks towered heavenward in a dazzling array of bright hues. Enormous leathery leaves hung heavily from majestic branches that loomed overhead. Thick vines twisted through the jungle, bridging the gaps between the trees and making it an impenetrable wall of vegetation.

Bersik went over to a tree and examined its bark, feeling the texture with his fingertips, tapping it with the butt of his gun.

The sweet odor hung heavily in the air. Its effect was almost overpowering. Bersik struggled to keep his mind from drifting off into pleasant but irrelevant contemplations. He ordered that a sample of the bark be removed for study in the lab.

A detail of men was put to work on the tree. Major Denn watched them as they hacked at the tough bark, and a perplexed frown creased his face. He turned to the colonel.

"Sir," he said, "do you notice the light that seems to be coming from inside the jungle? With such dense growth, I don't see how any light can filter in, much less out. It looks as if there's something in there—something white and luminescent."

Bersik peered into the heavy growth. "It's hard to tell with all these bright colors." He moved his head from side to side to get different lines of vision. "I think you're right," he said uneasily.

"The perfume seems stronger here, too," Denn observed. "Did you notice?"

"It might be a good idea to look into it," Bersik said. "Move a blaster into position and we'll cut a path through these trees."

A mobile blaster was leveled at the forest wall. Colonel Bersik signaled the gunners. There was a blinding flash, a zipping sound, a smell of ozone in the air, and a jagged hole appeared in the formerly solid barrier.

Bersik and Denn led the men through the opening in the jungle wall. They stepped into an immense field of whiteness, a field of beautiful flowers that extended as far as the eye could see. High overhead, the trees of the jungle spread their limbs and came together to form a protective roof that sheltered the masses of delicate flowers below.

Bersik nudged Denn and pointed to the leafy canopy above them.

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"That explains why we didn't spot this field from the air."

The major nodded absently and continued to gaze at the snow-white expanse that reached to the horizon. It was breathtaking! It was like a dream, like a trip to the land of Oz!

The odor of perfume was overwhelming. Bersik fought to control his thoughts. Lazy, sleepy thoughts. He struggled against them. Thoughts of slow flowing rivers. He tried to push them away. Thoughts of sailboats on a white-flecked sea. Thoughts of home.

The men of the expedition were standing at the edge of the field, awed by the sight of the flowers, intoxicated by their dizzying fragrance.

Pick one; said the thought. *Pick a flower.*

A few of the men bent down and gently plucked some lilies.

"Water lilies!" Bersik murmured. "But they smell so . . ."

Pick a flower, the thought repeated more strongly. *Pick a flower. Pick a flower!*

Bersik obeyed.

Moving as one person, the men stooped and, when they rose again, each of them was holding a blossom and breathing deeply its exotic scent.

THE COUNTERATTACK was succeeding! The huge fortress barrier had been unable to resist the alien assault. There had been a penetration of the defense ring. But the counterattack was succeeding!

There were a few errors, of course, but that was inevitable in such a large operation. There were a few tragic mistakes. They were regrettable, but they could not be avoided, and, fortunately, they did not hamper the defense . . .

No! No! screamed the lovely bloom as the small flower at its side was picked. *Don't let them take my baby!*

Help! Let me go! whined the yellowish flower as one of the men plucked it from the ground. *Can't you see that I'm not well?*

Not me! cried the fat, bloated lily. *I didn't volunteer!*

But, despite the few disturbances, the thought came through clearly to each man. *Pick a flower . . .*

Colonel Bersik sniffed at his flower. It was delicious. It was worth the trip from Earth just to . . .

Home. Go home. Home.

Almost immediately, Bersik gave the order to return to the ship, but the men had already begun to move out even before he spoke. They retreated through the opening in the jungle wall and started the trek across the rubbery grass, back to the *Magellan.* Each man carried a water lily, and occasionally lifted the flower to his nose and breathed deeply the sweet fragrance that did not fade.

The men filed aboard the *Magellan* and gingerly went about preparing the ship for departure. They strapped themselves into their couches. They waited.

Home. Go home.

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"Blast off!" Bersik commanded.

The great ship's engines roared to life, and the *Magellan* was streaking upward through the clouds above Venus. It spun into an orbit around the planet and accelerated until it exceeded escape velocity, then shot off into space on its course for Earth.

Relax. Smell the pretty flowers. Relax.

Bersik called the astrogator on the intercom. "What is our course?" he asked, "and estimated time of arrival?"

Silence.

"Report on course and ETA!" he repeated into the phone.

Smell the pretty flowers. Relax. Relax.

Bersik smiled. Once more, he spoke into the intercom. "It would be nice to walk down to the bay this afternoon and watch the gulls soar over the white-capped water . . ."

The voyage was a pleasant one. Never before had the crew of a spaceship in interplanetary flight been so happy and so contented. Every man was perfectly relaxed. At peace.

Smell the pretty flowers . . .

Each man on board was dreamily sniffing at a water lily when the great ship smashed into the Earth and burst apart in a blinding flash of light. No one saw the explosion, and few people felt the mild earthquake that shook the nearby countryside.

Nothing remained of the *Magellan* but dust and a huge crater in the middle of a forest preserve.

In the rainy season, the lake fills with water and beautiful lilies grow there. The perfume of these flowers, they say, is like nothing on this Earth. And, they say, if you visit the lake when the flowers are in bloom, you will feel a strong nostalgic yearning to be home. That's why they call it Homesick Lake.

Leading the entertainment parade in the current issue — on sale at your local newsdealer — of FANTASTIC UNIVERSE'S *best friend,* THE SAINT DETECTIVE MAGAZINE — *is a brand-new Saint adventure as stirringly glamorful as a drum majorette in full-dress regalia. It's called* THE GOLDEN FROG *and features Leslie Charteris' fantastic Simon Templar at his very best.*

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crazy, mixed-up planet

by . . . Charles E. Fritch

A very superior person was Talus and not in the least monkeylike. If the pink Earthians thought otherwise — it was their funeral.

TULUS was eighty-seven million light years from his home planet, Dorca, when the main reactor valve on his subspace motor began acting up. The ship lurched alarmingly and gave several shudders, and before he could cross the full width of the pilot's chamber the engines coughed and died. The rear reactor stem on the vessel's stern twitched briefly like a leg of a dying animal and then subsided.

Tulus was a patient man. Only the great god Greema knew how patient he was, and many a Dorcan went so far as to claim he was too patient for his own peace of mind. But this was too much, even for so philosophically resolute a navigator. Across millions of light years he had traveled for the sole purpose of securing for his mate Berba a spool of sky-green plastithread of precisely the proper shade, and the reactor valve had given him trouble almost from the start. It had sputtered and trembled and threatened to stop completely.

Once he had been forced to stop right in the middle of a great glowing galaxy to adjust the vibrating

Do you remember Charles E. Fritch's inimitably satiric little yarn—part fantasy and part prophetic science fiction—about the brilliant psychiatrist and the woman from Mars he couldn't seem to unscramble? Well, Mr. Fritch has done it again, but this time his protagonist is a hairy individual from the interstellar dark with a slight paranoid psychosis and an entire planet to unscramble. And thereby hangs a tale—and a tail!—you'll not forget.

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screw so that the ship wouldn't shake apart. And now the rebellious instrument had succeeded in silencing the engines.

He meditated upon the tragedy, drumming his fingers against the dashpanel in growing irritation, his tail waving great swishes of annoyance. The delay would almost certainly make him late for work at the nuclear fission factory, and he could just picture wheezled old Grimus consulting his sunwatch, and chuckling in glee as the penalties mounted, and the seconds ticked silently away.

Tulus felt the anger surge through him like some great flowing river, full of rapids and cataracts and wind-lashed spray plunging against the granitelike barrier of his patience. And then the dam broke.

Cursing in seven different languages, Tulus rose. Trembling with indignation, he picked up the only portable object within reach and tossed it furiously against the bulkhead. It was only a spool of memory-recording micro-tape, and it clanged harmlessly against the resonant metal barrier, doing no damage. His fingers clenching and unclenching, Tulus looked around for something breakable, something that would shatter into millions and millions of spinning fragments. There was nothing of the sort anywhere in the pilot chamber.

He cursed again even more volubly. He cursed his wife who had nagged him into taking the trip, and he cursed the makers of the ship—a Probos Subspacer, last year's model—and he even cursed the mechanic who had checked the vessel and assured him that everything was in splendid shape. Most of all, he raged bitterly against the age in which he lived—an age that made everything so durable that a justifiably angered man couldn't release his pent-up emotions by smashing, breaking, and exulting in the sweet, if suicidal music, of irreplaceable things shattering.

How he raged!

And when he could think of nothing else that merited vituperation, he drew out his disintegrator and blasted a nearby plastimetal table into swirling, waltzing motes of golden dust. After that, he felt better.

He sat down, suddenly relieved, and found that he could think about the injustice without becoming seethingly furious. Still, it was annoying. He curled his tail comfortably about him and put through an urgent telescreen call to Dorca.

"Hello, Interstellar Service Unit 77 H. This is Tulus 4713," he said the instant an image appeared. "I brought my '819 Probos Subspacer to your place the other day for a checkup. Now the main reactor valve's not working. The job was guaranteed, you know?"

"Our guarantee," the image said indifferently and almost insultingly, "applies only during a time-period of two days or a space-period of forty million light years, whichever

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happens to be shorter. Have you exceeded either period?"

"Of course I have," Tulus said, beginning to get exasperated. "You can go nearly forty million light years just by backing the ship out of the hangar."

"A slight exaggeration," the image pointed out. "Nevertheless, our guarantee no long applies. However, if you'd like space-service—"

"At your rates," Tulus said, "I should say not!" Irritably he cut off.

He could remember every infuriating aspect of a previous application for space-service when he had been only a few million light years out. They had made him sit around on his tail for three hours awaiting the arrival of a mechanic who had made a few minor adjustments that had taken only seven minutes of actual working time. The bill had set him back eighteen *depeels*. For a service call out here, the charge would be staggering. The thought of what it would be made him angrier still, and he wished again he had something breakable in his hands.

He sat down, curling his tail around him again, and impatiently scratched the hair below his right ear. There was a manual of emergency repairs somewhere on the ship, he recalled. Perhaps with luck he could fix the reactor valve himself. There could be no harm in trying, and meanwhile, he'd better let his wife Berba know precisely where he was in space.

He put in a telescreen call, and when her image appeared, he explained with careful and eloquent persuasiveness exactly what had happened.

"A fine thing," Berba said indignantly, her upper lip curling back over her amber-colored teeth and gums, "and you don't like it when *I* have a little trouble."

"When you have a little trouble," Tulus reminded her, trying to keep his thinning patience intact, "it's always because of a speeding violation or a bent reactor stem or something else that's nine-tenths your fault. I'm blameless entirely."

"Hmpf," Berba said, self-righteously. "Can I help it if those parking hangars are set so close together? And as for speeding—"

"All right, skip it," Tulus said wearily. "Look, while I'm checking over the manual, I'd be grateful if you'd determine for me exactly where in space I am. I may have to land somewhere out here for repairs." He gave her his coordinates.

"Are you sure you're *alone*," Berba asked, suspiciously. The hairs around her nose twitched and she twisted her short neck to peer into the shadows behind him.

"Of course, I'm not alone," Tulus snapped. "I've got four exquisitely beautiful women here with me. Now, get busy on those coordinates. I don't want to be drifting around out here all day!"

Irritably, he switched the screen off. Consign to perdition all suspi-

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cious women, he thought. He found himself wishing he *did* have four beautiful women with him, all of them with smooth brown hair, delicate flaring nostrils, and shapely tails. He sighed in bitter frustration. He didn't, so common sense dictated that he hunt up the manual and try to make some emergency repairs.

A wretched shame! he thought.

He ambled across the cabin, dragging his hands on the floor in the listless fashion which usually indicated that a Dorcan was thinking heavily. He found the manual after a brief search under a pile of miscellaneous equipment in a closet adjoining the sleeping quarters. The excitement of foraging through the closet made him forget temporarily that he was stranded in space. There was a dart ball racket which brought back many fond memories. He recalled that his first romantic encounter with Berba had occurred during a game under off-gravity. They had collided in mid-air, and their tails had become accidently interwoven.

It had been embarrassing, of course. But it had led to better things, and had eventually resulted in their marriage. She had possessed a really outstanding figure in those days, with not a bristly or matted hair to spoil her seductively alluring contours. And she was so graceful that not once during the courtship had she accidentally stepped on her hands or tripped over her tail. Sighing, he replaced the racket and reminded himself that the pleasant reminiscences could wait until he had repaired the reactor.

Carefully following the directions outlined in chapter five of the emergency repair manual, Tulus disassembled the main reactor valve and found that the cause of his trouble lay in the inside coating. It had worn calamitously thin where the terminal wire crossed the relay. He knew without looking that he didn't have a can of the coating handy. He was all set to start cursing again when Berba called.

"What are you doing out in *that* section," she wanted to know. "The General Space-Store is off in the other direction. By the way, did you get the plastithread?"

"Yes, I did," Tulus said irritably. "I was taking a shortcut. Never mind that now. Am I near any habitable worlds?"

"There's a small system of nine planets nearby," Berba said, "and two of them are inhabited—the second and the third. Did you get it in sky-green?"

"Yes, I got it in sky-green!" Tulus almost shouted, mentally cursing the dart ball game that had entangled him so permanently. "What are the coordinates?"

Berba told him. "Fine," he said. "Now look up as much data as you can on the planets, and see if there's anything that resembles the coating needed on the inside of a main reactor valve."

"Why don't you have a mechanic look it over," she said doubtfully.

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"It would take only a few minutes—"

"And pay those pirates a fortune?" Tulus bridled. "I will not. I'll be late for work first and even let old Grimus dock me all the credits he wants. I know what I'm doing."

"I hope so," Berba said, unconvinced. "Don't lose that plastithread. You can't get sky-green easily."

"I wouldn't *dream* of losing it," Tulus snapped, shutting her off with an impatient click.

He had an almost uncontrollable urge to take the plastithread and toss it out into space as far as he could, which in the frictionless void would be a considerable distance. But he knew that if he did she would only get him to make the trip again and she might even go along next time.

Stoically, he adjusted the dials for the coordinates she had given him, and automatically flipped the switch for the subspace drive. When the motors remained silent, he remembered the worn valve coating. He cursed again and started the auxiliary rocket engines.

In the two years that had elapsed since his purchase of the spaceship he hadn't used those engines once, and the previous owner hadn't either. There had been only four hundred thousand parsecs registered on the mileage dial when Tulus had bought the vehicle second-hand from his wife's brother who operated a used-spaceship concession on one of the inner planets.

Tulus had suspected the readings had been set back. But he could hardly accuse his wife's brother of being a crook, even though the rascal probably was . . . Anyway, the rocket motor spluttered, flaring sparks, and Tulus looked at the speedometer dial with open disgust.

"Four hundred and fifty light years an hour," he said in a tone of disbelief. "I'm barely moving!"

Glumly, he settled back on his tail and turned on the outer screens to view the approaching system. Fortunately for what peace of mind Tulus had left, the system was only about a hundred light years remote. He watched it grow swiftly larger. It had a medium-sized yellow sun, and eleven—no, nine planets. He leaned forward and saw that the fifth planetary orbit was taken up by a mass of asteroids.

The telescreen buzzer aroused him from his preoccupation with the system, and he punched a button that brought Berba's face into view.

"Did you get the data?" he asked her.

"Maybe you'd better call the service unit," she suggested hesitantly. "They at least could—"

"They could charge me a month's pay for a few seconds' work," he said. "I'm not going to give them hard-earned credits when I can do the job myself. Did you get the information?"

"What little there was," Berba

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said. "Actually, the solar system is so minor that hardly anything is known about the planets. The second is inhabited by green amphibians and the planet is mostly oceanic. The third is similar to ours, and the creatures are almost human."

"What do you mean by 'almost' human?" he asked her.

"Well, they walk upright like us. Only their forearms are much shorter and they're pink-colored and hairless, and—"

"Pink colored? Hairless?" Tulus shuddered, visualizing the combination. And his wife in her incredible, naive stupidity had called them "almost human"!

Berba nodded innocently. "They are really very primitive," she went on. "They haven't even developed space travel yet."

"Yes, yes," Tulus said impatiently. "But what about the valve coating? Have they got anything on the planet I can use."

"I don't know," his wife said helplessly. "There's no information on that. Tulus, why don't you call the service unit? Even if it does cost a little more than you can afford—"

"A *little* more?" Tulus exploded. "I'm not paying those robbers a single credit. Never mind, I'll find the coating on one of the planets."

"Which one, Tulus?"

"I'll try the third one," he said. "It sounds more promising, somehow. Don't ask me why."

"But, Tulus—"

"Make a couple of ergon sandwiches for me," Tulus said, interrupting her deliberately. I'll eat them when I get home. See you later."

He shut the screen off, disconnected the apparatus so that she couldn't bother him again, and settled back to watch the solar system rising swiftly toward him, paying particular attention to the third planet.

It was green—almost sky-green, he thought with some bitterness—and it had a single chalky-white satellite whirling around it. It was just barely conceivable that if the natives had any intelligence at all their best minds might be able to help him discover just the one right coating for the reactor valve. They hadn't space travel, Berba had said. Possibly he could even bribe them, if necessary, with a few "secrets" in return for their help.

At any rate, he was *not* going to call up the Interstellar Service Unit and pay their racketeering prices. That much was certain.

He got up, yawned, stretched lazily, and then scratched himself where a flea had gotten a foothold deep in his fur. He gave his tail a few experimental swishes and was satisfied that it had retained all of its flexibility. While his stomach may have gone slightly to pot, he was still as agile as ever, and very deliberately he hopped up and down several times to corroborate this. Unaccountably, his thoughts returned to the four non-existent women he'd dwelt upon earlier with illicit, but very agreeable ardor. Ah, well—

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The detectors clanged loud warnings, rudely waking Tulus from his reverie. He hopped into the control chair and watched the planet dart up at him. Frantically, he twisted dials, and threw switches, using both hands, both feet, and even putting his tail to work. Gradually the '819 Probos decelerated, pulling his stomach into his throat where it made unpleasant growling noises.

The jet tubes shuddered in their moorings, and vomited spasmodic bursts of flame toward the planet below. Tulus had barely time to select a landing spot before he was settling rightly into it. His stomach retreated to a more normal position, but he felt no better for the change. He was convinced that his internal organs were in new and possible dangerous positions and he half-wished he had called the service unit for repairs.

But he'd gone too far now to retreat with dignity. Besides, success was almost within his grasp. He'd show those mechanics, and his wife too, who refused to believe he could do it.

Tulus got up from the control chair and experienced sudden nausea. His tail shot out expertly, wrapped around the chair, and steadied him. In a few seconds, his head cleared and the room stopped its precarious pin-wheeling.

"Whew," he breathed. The next time his wife wanted sky-green plastithread, or purple, for that matter, he'd—

He left the thought uncompleted, his eyes riveted on the nearest porthole. Framed in it was a big stretch of sunlit grass with some strange square structures obscurely visible in the distance. The vista was not at all like a housing development area on his home planet. There were very few trees in evidence, and the houses were not built in the trees, but right on the ground. That circumstance failed to disturb him, however. He was familiar with the customs of other planets, especially primitive ones, and he knew that they were often strange and unfathomable.

He checked the air and the gravity and found both reasonably to his liking, though the temperature was a little low for normal comfort. But at least a space suit would not be needed, which was a blessing. If there was anything he hated it was to have a flea take to roaming while he was imprisoned in a spacesuit, unable to scratch or relieve the torment in any way no matter how hard he tried.

There were few tortures more complete.

He opened the airlock, tossed over the ladder, and descended hand over hand, dropping nimbly from the lowermost rung to the ground. Immediately he saw a small creature sitting on its haunches a short distance away regarding him with an unmistakable mixture of curiosity and amazement. Mentally, Tulus went over Berba's description of the planet's predominant animals. Pink and hairless, she'd said.

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This animal was grey and furry, and it had long ears propped up straight as though it were listening intently. It's nose quivered delicately.

"Are you intelligent?" Tulus asked it in the Basic Language. "Can you speak?"

"Of course not," the animal answered distinctly. "Rabbits can't talk."

"Oh," Tulus said, considering this startling bit of wisdom. "Where can I find the dominant species on this planet—the pink and hairless ones?"

"Over there, in that farmhouse," the rabbit told him, pointing his quivering nose in the proper direction. "I know, because once in a while one of them comes out with a weapon and tries to shoot me."

Tulus was shocked. "That seems cruel," he said. But then, on second thought, he remembered that other worlds had other customs, and what right had he to pass judgment on them? "Still," he said, "I hope you have weapons to fight back with."

"None at all," the rabbit said calmly. "Only my eyes and ears to see his approach, and my coloring to hide me among the rocks, and my speed to enable me to get away."

"That's not fair at all," Tulus said, though a more rational part of his mind whispered that it was none of his business. "Look," he said on impulse, "I have weapons on board my spaceship, one so powerful it could destroy this whole planet in one blow. I could give you one of the smaller ones—"

"No, thanks," the rabbit said. "We rabbits are a happy lot in general. Having weapons wouldn't make us any happier, and it might —make us sadder. Thanks, anyway."

Despite himself, Tulus admired the creature's primitive philosophy. In his calmer moments, he had often thought a similar rudimental acceptance of reality might benefit his own society.

"Well, good luck," he said.

"I should have," the rabbit said. "I have four rabbit's feet," and he hopped away to prove it.

Tulus watched the animal leave. After a moment of thoughtful reflection he decided the rabbit's statement was undoubtedly true, but wondered what significance it could possibly have. Shrugging, he turned his attention to his own more immediate problem.

The pink and hairless ones were in that clump of houses over there, were they? Well, it wouldn't take him long to find out if they could help him get back to Dorca. The thought of meeting the strange creatures filled Tulus with a sense of excitement such as he had never experienced before, and he scampered eagerly across the sunlit plain toward the dwellings.

He had almost reached them when he remembered what the rabbit had said about a weapon and shooting, and he paused briefly, considering that disturbing revelation. Then he remembered the disintegrator hanging at his side and went on.

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Any weapons the pink ones might possess would almost certainly be primitive and he was sure that his superior intellect could easily overcome them without recourse to force or violence.

There was a small fenced-in area surrounding several animals that pushed and squirmed happily in a large puddle of mud. They were small creatures, but larger than the rabbit, and indisputably pink and hairless.

"At last," Tulus breathed.

The animals had paid not the slightest attention to his approach, but suddenly one of them exclaimed, "Oink!"

"What did you say?" Tulus asked in the Basic Language.

"I wasn't talking to you," the creature responded. "I was merely sighing. I don't know whether I like eating best, or just splashing around like this."

Tulus grimaced, forcing himself to remember once again that other worlds had different and often quite unsanitary customs. Abstractedly he searched for an elusive flea.

"Are you the dominant society on this planet?" he asked.

"I am a pig," the creature said proudly. He appeared to ruminate for a moment, and then went on, "I don't really know if we pigs are the dominant species or not. I guess so. After all, we have tall pink creatures who wait on us and bring us our food." He considered this carefully, as if he had just thought of it for the first time. "They must be our servants. You know, we're really even luckier than I imagined. I'm glad you brought it up."

"Where are the *tall* pink creatures?" Tulus wanted to know, "The ones who walk upright?"

"Over there, in the white house," the pig said, lifting a mud-covered snout in the proper direction. "The woman's at home now."

"Thanks," Tulus said. All this was extremely interesting. But he remembered suddenly that he wasn't here on a vacation, and that he had to get the main reactor valve coated and travel back to Dorca in time to go to work.

So he scampered in earnest over to the front porch of the dwelling, nearly tripping over his dragging arms in his haste, and he hurled a thought at the door. He was surprised when it failed to open.

"These people are more primitive than I thought," he told himself. He searched about for some non-telepathic opening device and, finding none, hammered on the door with his hand. If hammering failed, he decided, at least there would be a noise that might persuade one of the pink and hairless ones to open it for him.

The door opened, and Tulus shrank back appalled at his first sight of the planet's predominant animal. It was pink-orange and though its body was nearly hairless, there was a profusion of wild dark hair billowing out from its head. The creature's complexion seemed to change from pink-orange to a

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greenish hue as it continued to gaze on Tulus, and it wavered slightly and held one hairless arm out to steady itself.

"Good heavens," it said, "a monkey!"

Tulus didn't know what a monkey was, but he had a strange feeling that the creature's remark was not intended as a compliment.

"Hello," he said in the Basic Language. "I'm from the planet Dorca, and my spaceship—"

The woman—the pig had called it that—gave voice to a sudden shriek that turned Tulus' blood cold. "George," she cried out, making the shrieking sound again—how was he to know it was laughter?—and bending almost double at the waist.

"George, you had me fooled completely. I thought you were a *real* monkey."

Tulus switched his tail in annoyance. "Woman," he said, in a very stern tone, "my name is not George. It's Tulus, and I've come to ask you—"

"Okay, I can take a gag," the woman said, "although on second thought, it is a pretty hokey costume. How do you work the tail?"

"The *what?*"

"The tail? Just how do you work it? It's pretty clever, I must admit, but as soon as I heard your voice I recognized you. You can't fool your own wife."

"That's true," Tulus admitted glumly, "but I'm afraid—"

"Come on in," the woman invited exuberantly, pulling him forward and closing the door firmly behind him. "Where did you get that costume—and why? You may as well break down and tell me all about it."

"Well—" he began.

"But first take off the headpiece," she insisted. "Your voice is so muffled I can hardly hear you." And she proceeded to help him.

"Be careful! Oh, don't!" Tulus cried out. But the woman merely shrieked again, and seemed maniacally intent on twisting his head loose.

He had not expected such intimate contact, and the closeness of the creature did nothing to benefit his stomach, even though, combined with the woman's natural smells, he detected a strange artificial scent which smelled rather pleasantly flowery.

Fortunately he managed to loosen her grip and scamper onto a nearby chandelier which swung like a pendulum beneath his weight. From this relatively secure position he looked warily down at the creature, and wondered whether it might not be advisable to disintegrate her, and stop this nonsense.

"Good heavens," she said in a trembling voice. "You—you're not George!" She wavered slightly and reached out toward the wall to steady herself.

"Exactly," Tulus said, his temper subsiding. "I'm Tulus."

"Too loose for what?" the woman inquired weakly.

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"My name," Tulus said with deliberate slowness, "is Tulus. I'm from the planet Dorca, and my spaceship needs repairing. Now, if you could direct me to the nearest scientist—"

"Oh, I get it," the woman said, her greenness fading a little. "You're a character in a publicity stunt for some new science-fiction movie." She nodded knowingly. "You certainly had me fooled for a minute. Boy, what a crazy mixed-up world this is."

Tulus was inclined to agree with her. He closed his eyes and slowly counted to one million, in triple decimal units. When he was through he felt no calmer. He swung back and forth on the chandelier, his tail darting to and fro like a great whip.

He thought about his ship, crippled and useless a short distance away. He thought about the Interstellar Service Unit with its exorbitant rates. He thought about old Grimus at the nuclear fission factory and how pleased the old devil would be. He thought about his wife Berba and the nagging she'd do. Within him, Tulus felt his blood come to a boil and knew that something would have to rip.

Nimbly, he leaped from the chandelier and drew his disintegrator. He opened the door. "Now, watch carefully," he directed.

The woman needed no urging. The instant he drew the weapon her eyes expanded to several times their natural size and remained riveted on him.

Tulus took careful aim and pulled the trigger. The large red building behind the pig enclosure disappeared in a sudden blinding flash of light. Tulus holstered the gun.

"There," he said triumphantly, "Now if you're really interested—"

But he might as well have saved his breath, for the woman was stretched out on the floor, unconscious, and serenely at peace with the world.

Tulus spluttered at this sudden inconvenience, hopping up and down and calling the woman unpleasant names in his native Dorcan. When he had finished, she still remained supine and unmoving, so he determined to let her stay that way. He went out on the porch and slammed the door angrily behind him.

Now, why couldn't sensible creatures like the rabbit and the pig be the dominant species of such an otherwise normal-appearing planet, he wondered. He shook his head sadly at the injustices of evolution and looked around for some other creature to try his luck with.

A paved road went past the farmhouse, and while Tulus stood staring intently into the hazy blue distances, a land vehicle zoomed past, and was quickly lost to view. Startled, Tulus leaped chattering back behind the protection of a post that helped support the porch roof and clung to it tenaciously.

As he peered around the barrier another vehicle shot past, and after a moment three more in rapid suc-

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cession. Tulus could see several persons inside. It made sense, of course. Having no trees and vines for transportation, the creatures had built vehicles which traveled along the ground. His admiration grew, as did a plan for flagging down one of the strange land craft.

"I'll just step out in front of the next one," he told the porch, "and when the pilot sees me he'll stop. Then I'll ask him to take me to a scientist."

The whispered and highly confidential remark reminded him that he wanted the scientist to help him with the valve coating, and that in turn reminded him that he wanted the valve coating so he could blast off into subspace. It also reminded him that no matter how fast he went he would probably be late anyway, and old Grimus and Berba would have a regular picnic in dissecting him, and—

He moaned and decided he was wasting time feeling sorry for himself when he should be doing something about it. He scampered down the porch steps, and across the interval of lawn, and stood in the middle of the road. By shading his eyes with one hand, he could see a black dot on the road moving swiftly towards him. Eagerly, Tulus hopped up and down, chattering and waving his arms. The dot grew larger.

He leaped away just in time. There was a deafening roar and a wheel nearly caught the end of his tail. Bewildered, he stared after the speeding vehicle and saw it swerve crazily, the occupants gawking back to look at him.

Tulus drew his gun and fired at the car. He missed, and disintegrated instead the bottom of a pole strung with wires. By the time he had calmed down sufficiently to take careful aim, the car was out of sight and he had lost interest in destroying it.

Replacing his weapon, he ambled on down the road. He thought briefly about returning to the spaceship and forgetting the incomprehensible pink creatures who seemed determined to misunderstand his logically motivated behavior. But the prospect of leaving with his mission unaccomplished pained him. He'd try once more, this time staying beside the road. If they wanted to stop, well and good. If not, at least it wouldn't be any hair off his tail.

Several more cars passed him during the next half hour, their pink occupants all craning their necks to stare at him. Finally, one of the cars stopped, a grey one with black letters proclaiming "State Police," and two pink creatures in dark blue uniforms got out. "At last," Tulus thought, with some relief, "these must be the scientists come to greet me."

"Take it easy, Fred," one of the pink creatures said to the other. "He might be dangerous."

Both held weapons, Tulus noticed with sudden alarm. He held out his arms in a friendly gesture.

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"I come on a peaceful mission," he told them in the Basic Language. "My name—"

"It talks!" the one called Fred croaked, turning slightly green.

"It can't be," the other said. "Monkeys don't talk."

"Maybe it's a circus freak," Fred ventured. "With a split tongue or something. There are talking dogs."

"Yeah," the other breathed hopefully. "I sure trust you're right. I wish we had brought a net along. I don't like to wrestle monkeys."

"I am not a monkey," Tulus insisted firmly. "My name is Tulus, and—"

"Get him, Fred!"

Fred leapt forward and threw a half-Nelson around Tulus' furry waist. "Give me a hand! Quick!" he shouted.

"Now, hold on," Tulus protested.

"That's just what we intend doing," the other pink creature said, leaping forward too. "Look out! He's got a gun."

"Not any more he hasn't," Fred said triumphantly, holding the weapon aloft.

Tulus struggled, but the two pink specimens were huskier than the one at the farmhouse. They held him in an iron grip. "This is an outrage," he stormed. "What are you going to do with me?"

Fred scratched his head inexpertly. "That's right, what *are* we going to do with him? There's no zoo around here."

The other shrugged. "We'll just have to put him in jail, I guess."

"In jail? On what charge?" Tulus demanded.

"That's right," Fred admitted. "You can't put him in jail unless he's done something wrong."

"Listen, brother," his companion said, jabbing an authoritative finger at Tulus, "when a monkey goes walking down a state highway, we don't need a charge to slap him in the clink. Monkeys don't have no civil rights, see?"

"I see," Tulus said, debating the advisability of biting the finger wagging impolitely beneath his nose. "But I don't like it. Besides, I don't know what a monkey is. I'm certain I'm not one. My name is Tulus, and—"

"Well, you look like a monkey," the officer pointed out, "so we act accordingly."

They proceeded to act accordingly by herding him into the back seat of the vehicle, where the one called Fred immediately snapped handcuffs on his wrists. Fred sat nervously on the edge of the seat, even when the car roared into motion. He tried to avoid looking at his prisoner.

Tulus felt properly indignant, for he had anticipated a far different reception from primitives. Not a banquet or a parade perhaps, but a little respect would not have been out of order. He felt the old familiar urge pounding at him to toss all gyros to space and start tearing and smashing and breaking. There were probably a lot of breakable things on this crazy planet.

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But he managed to console himself with the reflection that now at least he would be meeting high-placed officials who would listen to his story, and among them he might find a sympathetic ear.

"I don't get mad very often," he told himself silently, "but when I do there's a good reason." But the time for anger, he realized, was not now. For the greater good of repairing his reactor valve, he must suffer a temporary inconvenience, and bide his time.

He didn't care, though, for the planet's primitive means of locomotion, which made him feel only slightly less ill than had the rocket deceleration. He tried to watch the pink creature in the driver's seat to see what crude manipulations were necessary to keep the vehicle in motion. But during much of the fifteen minute journey he kept his eyes shut, opening them at the sudden screeching of brakes and honkings of horns only to satisfy a natural curiosity as to what they had missed colliding with.

They passed into a busy section that was encircled like a fortress with the granitelike facades of tall buildings and crowded with double lines of swiftly moving traffic. At their destination—a large official-looking grey building—Tulus was rudely escorted from the vehicle and guided up the steps. Several passers-by did double-takes at seeing him, and he reflected that, while on Dorca he was just an average citizen, here he would naturally be regarded as an advanced evolutionary product.

It was not at all surprising, therefore, that these creatures should react in such a manner. He thought briefly about Berba and what she would think of his sudden importance—briefly because he resisted the thought as soon as it came. First problems first, he told himself—and was promptly presented with another immediate problem as he was ushered into a cell.

"I'd like to see the leader of this planet," he said.

"Sure," the officer replied. "Just cool off in here for awhile, and try to relax. We'll send him in when he arrives."

Though he was not overly warm and had no particular wish to cool off, Tulus accepted the statement with some degree of relief. He shrugged noncommittally and made a quick stabbing motion for a flea which was crawling towards the sanctuary of his right armpit.

"I hope I don't have to go through any diplomatic channels," he said, upon a sudden thought. He had originally assumed that no such problem would arise, and that he would be able to land, find the reactor valve coating, and take off. He had not considered that there might be complex laws concerning visitors from space which these primitives would feel obligated to carry out.

He sat down on a hard cot a few feet from the cell door, curled his tail comfortably about himself, and worried about his latest troubling

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thought. Perhaps, he wondered, he should have called the Interstellar Service Unit, after all. Exorbitant rates or not, the time element was important, and was rapidly becoming critical.

Tulus frowned, and his tail switched in a sudden frenzy. Old Grimus, the Clockwatcher, would be at his post bright and early, waiting to see whom he could catch coming in late. Until now, Tulus had never been late. But now he was probably going to break all tardiness records. He felt trapped and completely helpless.

In sudden resignation, he took hold of the bars of his cell and called out, "I've changed my mind. Let me out, please." But no one came. In a gruffer tone he repeated the request, but still no one came. Angrily, he paced the cell, his tail swishing. Then he grabbed the bars and shook them until they rattled.

Finally, the uniformed creature known as Fred appeared, nervously ushering in another creature who had transparent discs suspended by a wire frame before his eyes. They stopped before Tulus, and the newcomer stared through the transparent discs with interest.

"Er—this is my brother Arnold," Fred said, and added quickly, "Arnold's a biologist. I knew he'd be interested in you, so I decided to call him."

Tulus listened patiently to Fred's explanation. On Dorca, introductions were generally accompanied by an intertwining of tails, but Tulus had noticed early upon his arrival that the pink creatures had the misfortune to lack that useful anatomical feature. Besides, under the circumstances he felt no obligation to be polite.

"See here," he said, with all of the forcefulness the Basic Language could muster, "I've changed my mind. I want to go back to my spaceship."

"Imagine that," Arnold said, peering interestedly through his transparent discs. "A *talking* monkey."

"I thought he might be the missing link," Fred volunteered. To Tulus he said: "Arnold's not really a biologist. He's a plumber. But he's always wanted to be a biologist . . . Go ahead, Arnold, say something biological."

Arnold blushed modestly.

"This is all very interesting," Tulus lied, "but I'd like to get back to my spaceship."

"*Imagine* that," Arnold said, still properly amazed. "A talking monkey."

"Can you tell if he's a missing link," Fred said hopefully. "I could use a little extra cash right now, and I thought—"

"Not without looking at him a little closer," Arnold said. "From here he looks like just an ordinary monkey that can talk. Could you open the cell?"

Fred hesitated. "Well," he said, "well, I—I don't know." He wet his lips and looked around guiltily.

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"We don't want him to escape, you know."

It was the word "escape" that arrested Tulus' attention, for he realized with a sudden startling clarity that that was precisely what he would have to do if he ever wanted to leave this crazy mixed-up planet. With renewed interest he watched Fred's lips quivering with hesitation.

"Well, okay," Fred said, finally, "but only for a minute."

Tulus waited, poised, hardly daring to breathe, his legs coiled under him. When at last the door swung carefully open, he gave a great leap and bounded over the two suddenly startled pink creatures, knocking them with shattering violence to the floor. He paid no attention to their frantic exclamations of surprise, fear and anger, but sped on down the hall, trying to remember where the exit was.

By the sheerest stroke of good luck he found it quickly, jerked it open, and scampered down the stone steps into the street. One of the land vehicles honked wildly, and just missed him. His blood boiled. He flung an obscene Dorcan phrase after the vehicle, and reached for his disintegrator—then remembered that the uniformed creatures had taken it from him. Well, he'd have to do without it.

He jerked open the door of a passing vehicle, and leaped in. The driver stared at him in terror, let out a shriek and tried to crawl through the rear window.

"Stay in here," Tulus commanded in his most terrifying tones, "and you won't get hurt. Drive down this street."

The driver gulped, turned a sickly shade of green and obeyed. The vehicle shot forward like a jet of liquid argon.

"Turn left here," Tulus said suddenly, remembering. "Go faster."

The driver went faster. They sped down a widely curving road, tires humming against the pavement. Behind them a siren sounded.

"Faster," Tulus urged, "or I'll eat you alive."

The thought was nauseating to Tulus, but the threat accomplished its purpose. The driver turned a deeper shade of green, shivered, and pushed his foot down hard on the accelerator pedal.

The countryside streamed past. Tulus smiled. If only Berba could see him now. Another wish leapt unbidden into his mind. If only he could have gotten the valve coating! Or even have called the Interstellar Service Unit, and smothered his pride.

The spaceship came into sight.

"Stop," Tulus ordered.

The driver was so anxious to please that Tulus was thrown violently forward against the front glass. But in his eagerness to get back to his own ship he paid no attention to the grievously swelling bump on his forehead or the sudden turning over of his stomach. He leaped out, with the shrill whine of the sirens loud in his ears, and raced

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across the field. Behind him, the vehicle made strange clashing noises and vanished down the road in a cloud of dust.

"There he is, George," a familiar voice cried out. "That's the one that blew up the barn and attacked me. Shoot him!"

Tulus glanced back over his shoulder. The pink creature he had encountered earlier in the farmhouse was standing on the porch pointing at him, and beside her was another pink creature with an abundance of hair on his chest. The other creature held a long metal tube in his hands.

Tulus didn't stop to ask questions. He simply increased speed until he heard an explosive roar and felt a thousand angry bees sting him on his backside. He cried out then in furious resentment, and ran faster, his tail twitching painfully. As he reached the ladder and started to ascend, another roar came.

But he stubbornly closed his eyes and kept climbing, as fast as he could pull himself up. The hull of the ship quickly became splattered with tiny chunks of metal. Still refusing to pause, he thanked the great god Greema for sparing his tail a further, and more grievous onslaught, and leaped the last few feet into the airlock.

The clang of the closing portal rang musically in his ears, but even then he didn't pause to sigh in relief. He reeled across the pilot chamber, and forgetting his wounds, flung himself into the control chair. Instantly, he cried out again and leaped up cursing, jabbing at the switches and buttons from a standing position. Beneath him, the rocket tubes shuddered, and he felt his stomach grow hollow and begin to contract.

Not until the planet was a small round ball receding into the spatial void did Tulus stop, and stare back at it. He felt a justified surge of resentment, and he winced again as a spasm twitched his injured tail. He thought about the Interstellar Service Unit and the prices he'd now be compelled to pay. He thought about Berba and how she'd nag him for this, with an intolerable "I told you so" look on her face.

He thought about old Grimus at the nuclear fission factory and how the old buzzard would take such delight in the misadventure that he would never let him forget it. He thought about the disintegrator he'd left behind, the deluxe model which had cost him 4.99 credits but was guaranteed to shoot under water. He thought about his backside peppered with chunks of metal, his neatly combed tail ventilated by the small round pellets shot at him.

Tulus got mad. In the space below him the planet spun unsuspecting through its orbit. It was sky-green, a color that had started everything, that had set the stage for his undoing. Tulus didn't like its color.

With a smile of satisfaction curling his hairy upper lip, Tulus reached out to press a button. He knew what would happen if he did—a

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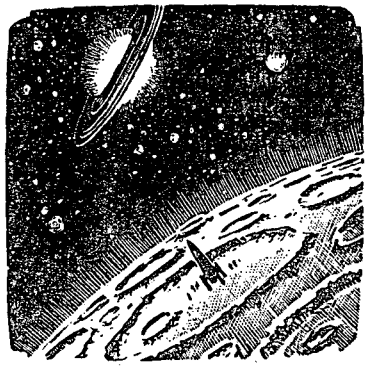
beam of light would dart out from the '819 Probos toward the sky-green planet. And the instant the light touched the planet the spinning globe would change color. First it would turn red. Then it would shrivel and turn black. And it would remain a black, smoking cinder spinning on into space, spinning on for all eternity.

He took one more look at the planet—his finger on the button—and suddenly he felt a sorrowful, overwhelming pity for the rabbit and the pig. Tulus decided not to press the button, and so deciding, felt better almost immediately. Even when he put a call through to the Interstellar Service Unit, his anger was minor. He did not even mind the spasm of pain that went through him when his tail gave an automatic swipe.

"Imagine them trying to make a monkey out of me," he whispered and smiled comfortably to himself.



HANS STEFAN SANTESSON, *the only Honorary Monster we've ever met (yes, Honorary Member,* TLMA*), will discuss current Science Fiction and Fantasy titles beginning with the next issue. A pioneer in the Book Club use of SF while Editor of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club during 1945-'52, Santesson spoke at the 9th and 10th World Science Fiction Conventions in New Orleans and Chicago. Active with the Mystery Writers of America (and former Chairman of their Student Awards Committee), Santesson, a Science Fiction reader since the late twenties, has lectured on SF and Fantasy writing, led a Writer's Workshop and done considerable editorial work in the field, and was one of the organizers of the professional Fantasy Writer's Guild. He also—but enough for now. Watch for him!*

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homecoming

by . . . J. Harvey Haggard

Leek's favorite songs were "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and "The Old Familiar Faces." But Loda City threw the joyful melody off-key!

THE SPACESHIP landed, and ceased to throb and pulse, its stern lights blinking off. After a moment, a man emerged and walked to the pier edge of the landing island. Martin Leek was small, slender, and shyly wistful of aspect. Yet his retiring look concealed a grim fortitude that refused to compromise with the more outrageous aspects of life.

"Welcome, traveler. Lots of profit this trip?" called Eugene, extending his saurian head aloft. He lolled on a mudbank, but he had plainly been watching the passengers debark. "Welcome home."

"Hello," said Martin. He squinted against the wind—chill, malodorous it was. He pulled his thin cloak away from him as he clutched his flat traveling bag. He answered the other's greeting, one thought at a time. "Not too much. Thanks. Glad to be back."

Behind him, aerocabs came and went like insects, taking passengers across the swampglades to Loda City. A monotube shot its glassy, bulletlike cab shoreward with a *swoosh*. Those inside, he observed

J. Harvey Haggard's recent stories have been largely concerned with the mystery surrounding the origin and nature of human beings—a mystery which modern anthropology has failed to resolve. Are there intangibles in human evolution which point to some factor at work in the universe of stars which proceeds from the general to the particular in an often quite horrifying way? You'll see what we mean when you read this tiny yarn.

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with a shiver, looked warm and cozy. Buttoning the top button of his wind-lifted coat, Martin turned his back on the tube and twisted his thin lips into a smile directed at Eugene.

"Would you like a ride to town?" asked Eugene. Martin grinned and nodded.

"Grab a hump," said Eugene. He reared from the mud-bank, obligingly. Martin straddled the upper ridge of armor plates, holding his bag close. Several new-arrivals from other worlds squinted against the savage wind, gaping with disbelief. "All comfy?" Eugene asked. "All set to take the jolts?"

Seeing his passenger was, Eugene took off. His departure became spectacular but not ungainly. Relaxing his height, he submerged halfway and began paddling swiftly across the thick fluid. His flappers made sucking noises, and left on the smooth waters of the swamp-glade a wake of widening ripples. Vegetable growths made islets here and there, and now some moved of their own accord, drawing away from the swimming behemoth. The keen wind, fruity with unpleasant aromas, blew spray patterns of scud. The sky above had been poisoned a slight orchid.

Martin's cigarette made a hissing sound as he flung it into the roiling muck. He braced his legs, and squeezed his knobby knees together. He could hardly keep from shivering with cold, or prevent his teeth from chattering but he could at least protect the traveling kit.

Martin hadn't fathomed all of the strangeness of Yulil when he'd brought his new wife, Rugie, to the planet twenty years before. They'd been sustained by dreams, gossamer break-easy dreams, bubbles that held a teeming universe. He had promised to lay a cosmos at her feet, a planet at a time—and Yulil had been first on his list.

Yulil. Geneless world. Amidst pleasures and palaces . . . be it ever so humble . . . there's no place like . . .

A world of polymorphs, say. Poly, for many. Morphs, for shape. Many shapes. No two alike. An interesting planet, when first you heard of it. No one had clearly understood at first. Then the scientists had detected that an inner radiation bombarded the living tissues of all life on Yulil.

Everything on Yulil was different. Each living creature from the other, all different in turn. Tentacular . . . insectivorian . . . these were but words to denote biological kinship or dissimilarity, but here there could be no such thing as similarity. No such thing even as a separate species. Just substance knowing but one natural law, to evolve into something unlike anything that had ever existed before. Unlike produced the unthinkable. However, for all of that, there was a lot of *gneissilite* on Yulil. You could make rocket fuel out of that.

"How's everything on the other

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planets?" asked Eugene, forever inquisitive. He'd never been off of Yulil.

"Humdrum."

"The War in Vegas?"

"Invaders from the Seven Sisters have the edge, but it's touch and go."

"Wup! Hold it!" Movement surged, and an amorphous mass arose in front of Eugene. It had none of his saurian sleekness. It was as primal as something swimming in stagnant water under a microscope. Everything hinted at a weak mental structure, largely intuitive. It threatened attack.

"Scrambola!" yelled Eugene. He slashed out viciously, exposing a terrific mouthful of teeth.

The primordial thing squirmed rapidly away.

"Of life," quipped Eugene, "that's a most terrible parable." Then he brayed at his own humor.

Martin joined in, chuckling as much from relief as anything else. His thoughts slipped back to those of a moment before.

Home and Rugie! She wasn't a princess by earthly standards, of course. But then, Martin Leek always enjoyed the traditional thrill of homecoming. He experienced a quickening of his pulses, a heightening of his perceptive faculties as the shore neared.

Eugene swam against a heavy out-going tide, then found solid footing and waded ashore. Martin Leek slid off. He balanced for a moment on a walkway, then turned to Eugene.

Compromise . . . he thought. Adaption to circumstance. Who could have foreseen the problem that would confront all Earth dwellers who came to Yulil? Even from the moment of conception, from the foetus onward, the genes and chromosomes that determine heredity characteristics were destroyed or distorted by a radiation from the world's core.

"Thanks for the lift," said Martin Leek gratefully.

"Any time," said Eugene.

"You'll be up at the house later, won't you?"

"Sure. Tell mother I want to watch the Arcturian Express make a landing. Then I'll be up in plenty time for dinner."

Martin Leek turned toward the city. His bent shoulders drew more erect, and he walked quickly as he stepped forward, humming a tune. He was home.

Eugene taxied around toward the landing island, churning the water to a foaming wake. He turned once, still in hailing distance.

"So long, dad," he called.

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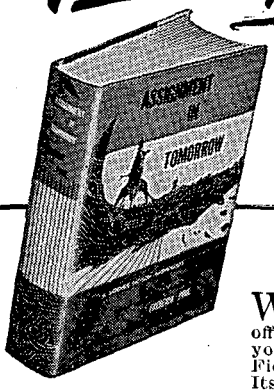

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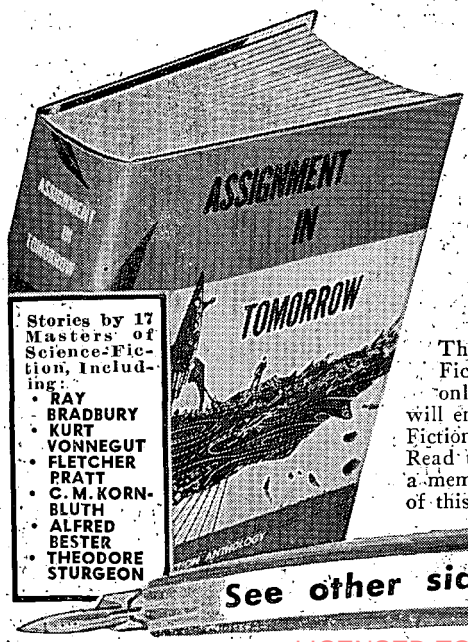

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